

MANHUNT

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR C RIME DETECTION MAGAZINE

Hangover Alley

BY
ROBERT PAGE JONES

JUNE, 1961

35 CENTS

DON TOTHE

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EVERY
STORY NEW!



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MANHUNT VOLUME 9, NUMBER 3, June, 1961. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for 12 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. Funds) for 12 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Second Class Postage paid at Concord, N. H. and at additional mailing offices. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1961 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

*With the help of the Greek he was
on his way back up, out of the gutter.
But the path was too easy . . . and
he couldn't figure the angle.*

THE HONEST JOHN

BY
MARTIN SUTO

AS USUAL the fog and rain caught Grimes flat-footed. As usual he was tanked up, half-starved with white blotches on his once pink cheeks, and dead to the world. Without a sou in his pocket for a dry flop for the night. But it was normal procedure for Grimesy—s.o.p. for the past two years.

Two years ago tonight to be exact he had left Laraine in his expensive apartment uptown and hit skid row for good. He had been cracking up slowly before that because he suspected she was playing fast and



loose with him. When he found her with her beau, he simply walked out of the apartment and down to Morton Street clear across town and into oblivion. That night, too, had been foul with rain and mist.

It was a rotten world.

Tonight was as bad as far as the psychology of a wino was concerned. He woke up feeling as if a bag of cement had fallen on his back. Rheumatic pains lanced him up and down. He groaned and tumbled off the packing cases behind Angelo's market and staggered out of the alley. Framed in the glowing mist at the end of it a cop peered in and went past. Grimes ploughed across the street, narrowly missed being cabbed, and plunged into the Greek's barroom.

It was like heaven after his bed in the alley. The place was hot and moist, and noisy with patrons of the after supper, longshoremen crowd. The Greek was too busy behind the stick to notice him plop into a booth in the dim rear. Tonight being Friday the Greek had his helper, an ex-pug by the name of Randolph. They called him Jawbones. He was a guy, from the mid-west who had drifted East to fight in the big-time. He never made the big-time so he did longshoring. Later the Greek put him to work keeping the place orderly. Grimes had seen Jawbones take on three dockers and bang their heads together.

Grimes hung around the Greek's because he had discovered

that the Greek whose name was Dmitri Filodorus had a weakness for helping bums on their way down. In other words Grimes hadn't reached the bottom yet. But tonight he felt as if he had finally hit the bottom of the ocean.

When he finally caught the Greek's eye, the Greek put a beer and a whiskey at the end of the bar and Grimesy staggered the ten feet or so across the sawdust to pick up his loot. Later when the Greek came by on his way across the room to deliver a plate of pigs' knuckles, he put the touch on the Greek for a room at Bailey's Hotel. Bailey's was the best flop house on Shawmut and Washington. The cockroaches were more cultured.

On the way back the Greek sat down and put a half buck in Grimes' filthy shirt. He shook his head. Grimes had already sopped up the boilermaker.

"A man like you," growled Filodorus, "should be working in an office, making brains work for him."

He sat on his haunches like a bull taking a spill and tapped his round, grizzled skull. His mouth was hidden behind a floppy black moustache.

Grimes stuck out his hand and shook the Greek's sausage-like fingers. He shook his head from side to side but grinned.

"You're a pal, Phil," he muttered. "A real good guy. What makes the world go round? I say with Victor Herbert, it's love, that's what. One

of these days I'll get on my feet—and fall right back here where I belong."

The Greek scowled. "A real man does not fall apart because of a bad woman. If he does, he climb right back and make better man. Make a business, lot of money, to do something for himself and family. I mean old timers. Send money back to the old country. Many people need help. The world always need help. Shame to waste your talent, Mr. Grimes."

"Got no talent," said Grimes thickly. "You're talking through your hat, Phil. That philosophy becomes you, not a gosling like me. All I want is to sleep this off. Tomorrow or the day after you can work me to the bone. I'll sweep the place as neat as a pin. One more for the road and I'm your valet, Phil."

His eyes were two pinholes in wells of eyes. The skin around them was puffed up like baked apples. The Greek slapped the table lightly and groaned as he heaved himself erect.

"Hold the fort, my friend."

When he came back Grimes was snoring with his eyes open. He woke up when the Greek tapped the glasses down lightly.

"I got a proposition for a good man like yourself," said the Greek, narrowing his eyes.

Grimes took the shot neatly and plunged his lips over the beer glass. He drank as if it was his last. He looked at the Greek and nodded.

Filodorus wiped his hand on his apron.

"It's this. There's a friend of a friend, you understand Mr. Grimes, who needs a favor. For this favor he pay one, two, maybe three hundred dollar. You understand, Mr. Grimes? A little work. You get paid. You take bath, dress in new clothes. After maybe you find girl-friend, live in good place, eat fine food, drink. Maybe raise family. Sound o.k. to you?"

"Sure," said Grimes whose mind had suddenly skipped back to Laraine and the luxurious world they had inhabited together.

"Tomorrow, Phil. Be glad to oblige. Anything you say." He put his elbows on the table, ready to drop off again.

"No. Now!" said the Greek. He was urgent. His eyes almost glared.

Grimes put his head back and stared dizzily. The Greek swam into view and the tavern took on the aspects of a den out of the Arabian Nights.

"Sure," he muttered. "Tonight. What can I do for you, Phil?"

The Greek hovered over him. Suddenly his paws shot out and Grimes found himself erect. The Greek was a monster of power.

"You come," said the Greek, and he half-carried, half-walked Grimes through the smoke and din to the rear where he sat Grimes in a chair. Even in his bleary condition Grimes noted how comfortable, even luxurious was this back room. There

was a comfy, lived in atmosphere to the rooms. There was furniture, tables, TV set, radio, bookshelves, desk. Over the threshold of an adjoining room the Greek snapped on a light and beckoned.

"You take a shower now. Shave. Dress. Here are clothes. They fit you. We talk more when you through. I have a good drink for you when ready. O.K." He left the room.

Grimes stared around him in amazement. Old Phil sure had what it takes. Talk about appearances and reality. This old Greek had class, more class than he'd realized. For the second time since he'd waked up behind the market, Grimes felt a nostalgic pang for the old days when he'd been living in class himself. For the old days when dropping into select clubs was a matter of course. And when his drink was ready as soon as the boy spotted him coming across the lush carpet.

"The same, Mr. Grimes?"

"Thank you, Jimmy."

"Oh, a lady said she'd be in the lobby of the hotel at 7:00 sharp, Mr. Grimes."

"Fine, Jimmy. Here, don't bet it all on . . ."

" . . . and a Mr. Lord called and asked for you to give him a ring. He'll be on his way back to Chicago on the late flight tomorrow night."

But it was the image of his wife that always shattered the past and

made the world beneath his feet open wide like a chasm into which he plunged time after time. Was it because he was sorry for himself or was it because he had loved her so, her personality that intrigued him with its special brand of come one and reserve, her naked body with all its beauty. But there were days, weeks, months when he hardly thought about her at all, hardly thought about anything period.

The shower was a thing of beauty, too.

All pure tile and ivory. The automatic gadget for water nonplussed him. He stayed inside and let the water pour over him like a purification of his body and soul. When he came out he saw that the Greek had laid out some clothes. He grinned as he toweled himself before a full length mirror. The Greek had certainly surprised him. The memory of a wartime deal like this tugged at him. There was always somebody or something in this world to surprise a guy when he least expected it. Somehow shaving with the gleaming equipment before the flawless glass gave him a lift. His fatigue left him and he gloried in the final process of dressing up.

For a guy who was still in the throes of a bender he looked almost sober and fit. It was an amazing transformation. The Greek whistled when he came in with a drink on a tray, and the ever-present bar rag on his arm.

"Say, you're a different man!"

Still staring in the mirror Grimes did another slow take of himself. It was a revelation to see the new guy who stared back at him, bleary-eyed and pouchy, it was true, but clean-cheeked and presentable for all that. He still had a touch of that air of distinction that had helped him go a long way in the past. Then again he'd been on the bum only two years, and he'd started out with his old vitality. It takes years to break down a good man for keeps.

He took the drink from the Greek with shaking fingers and drank it quickly. He almost brought up the bitter stuff. The Greek laughed.

"That is from my special cellar to sober you up. From now on you walk straight line. Understand?"

Grimes gagged again.

"Keep talking," he urged. A hard core of determination unexpectedly formed in the pit of his stomach. The Greek was right. It was time to get back on his feet. He was through hating himself. A vision of the old life drenched his mind with ice-cold clarity. The Greek eased himself down on a hassock and pawed out a wallet. He took out a sheaf of brand new bills and a set of airline tickets. He handed them to Grimes. The money was in fifties and totalled three hundred dollars. The tickets were for a late flight out of International for Miami.

"Who do I see in Miami and what am I supposed to do, Phil?"

"First you promise you keep mouth shut when you come back. Second, you take package from terminal and do not open."

Grimes sat down in a soft chair that must have cost the Greek something. "Wait a second, Phil. You're going too fast for me. What's this all about and who'm I working for?"

The Greek was impatient for the first time.

"You do not have to take job, Mr. Grimes. You are doing Filodorus favor for a friend who did many favors for Filodorus."

Grimes threw up his hands.

The Greek smiled briefly.

"You take this key which is for box at terminal. In Miami go to Hotel of the Flamingo and give to Mr. James Brewer. That is all. Simple for you?"

"Very. Providing first I look see into package," he mimicked the Greek unconsciously. "I'm no green kid, Phil. Just between you and me why should I trust anyone at this stage of the game?"

The Greek shook his head violently.

"You do not open!"

"This is ridiculous. First you prime me up to get a new lease on life, then you expect me to patsy maybe. How do I know?"

The Greek sighed.

"O.K. You inspect package."

Grimes was relieved. For a moment the Greek had him guessing. He got up unsteadily and slapped

the Greek on the back. It was like hitting the back of a walrus.

"Right. There's nothing to it. Thanks, Phil. My head's still down there in back of Angelo's but I'll be all right."

"Good," said the Greek. "You stay a few days on beach and have vacation maybe. Lots of good food, drink, sunshine and women, eh Mr. Grimes?"

"Why not?" said Grimes. He felt the beautiful sun on his hide already.

"The plane leaves at eleven-fifteen," said the Greek, clapping Grimes on the back. "You sleep some now. I wake you up and call taxi when ready. You have good ride. And you no drink too much?"

"Don't worry, Phil. I've got enough in me to last across the desert. Be just my luck though to catch the frost when I get there."

No sooner had the Greek gone when Grimes lay down on the divan and was fast asleep. The thought of going south suddenly gave him a sense of well-being. There couldn't be anything serious to the trip if the Greek had okayed his inspecting the package. Still he wondered what it was all about and what was in the package.

When he woke up the Greek was tugging at his shoulder.

"I'm ready," he said, swinging his feet to the floor. "Feel like a new man already."

The Greek had gotten a top coat and hat from somewhere that fitted

him perfectly. Once again he saw himself in the mirror and was pleased. It was certainly strange how a small thing really, an act of kindness, could make a man recall he was a vertebrae.

He shook hands with the Greek and searched his big red face with its flowing moustache. But it was impossible to catch an expression on such a face.

"Thanks, Phil," he said with a touch of feeling.

"The taxi is waiting," said the Greek.

At the terminal Grimes stared around at the hurry and bustle, at the glitter, the glamour of people rushing and arriving in a hurry from distant places. It seemed ages ago when he had fitted in nicely in this same atmosphere. Somehow he felt like a returnee from a Siberian salt mine. Part of it pleased him. The vain speed, the movement, the voices, chilled him a bit. People seemed to jerk their heads too often, spasmodically glancing here and there at a new arrival, as if they were self-conscious of their own status in jetting from one part of the country to another.

What did it all mean? Maybe that philosophical streak in him had helped Laraine to tire of him. Maybe his rigid character had been too much for her passionate, fun-loving nature? He pushed through the knots of people, baggage cars, the booming voices, and fitted the key

to Box 101. Inside was a parcel wrapped in white paper exactly the shape of a cigarette carton. He juggled it a bit. It was not heavy. There was nothing loose moving inside. Whatever it was it was not a bomb. That thought had been uppermost in his mind since the Greek had asked him to deliver it. Well, it wasn't a bomb but he was curious enough to find out what it was. He headed for the lavatory and locked himself in a stall. He snapped the scotch tape ends off, untied the wrapping string easily, and unfolded the paper on the toilet seat. He lifted the box top and stared. There were two stacks of bills, hundred dollar bills mostly, and they were genuine. They had been pressed and flattened and smoothed but they were old and plenty used. He replaced the top, rewrapped the paper, and stuck the box in the briefcase.

The loudspeaker voice was advising his flight to take their seats. Inside his head an idea floated around in the fog of the past two years. Dimly he sensed there was some crucial thing he had to know about the Greek, about his drop, Brewer in Miami, about himself. What was the meaning here? If the Greek had known the package contained money would he have agreed to let him open it? But if he wanted him to go at all costs would he not have agreed? Nothing at the moment seemed to fit inside his head.

The loudspeaker boomed:

"Please take your seats! Flight 9 leaving at eleven-fifteen. Runway 5. Passengers please go aboard." He gave his ticket to a smooth-skinned, red-haired stewardess with a fixed but warm smile. Half-consciously he wondered how she would react in bed. But it was only a vagrant thought. Guiltily though he went through to the huge plane poised massively all silver and gray on the gleaming dark runway. Up the ladder and into a seat. People ahead of him and behind milled a bit, talking statically. He sat next to a bald fellow with a silk gray suit and red tie. His coat and hat were in the rack above. He stowed his own coat away. The bald man was dozing. He didn't seem important.

Suddenly he needed a drink.

They fastened seat belts. Nothing seemed important now. The stewardess came by and he realized despite the alcohol how carnal his appetite was suddenly. The motors roared. The plane swung around suddenly and began to taxi. He fell asleep before he could order a drink.

When he awoke the bald man was gone. And so was the fat one across the aisle with the woman and child. They had made a stop somewhere. He looked out and below at the mass of cumulus, and here and there a break in it where an expanse of blue ocean shone upward. Coral reefs gleamed briefly. He felt the plane change its angle of flight. He shuddered at the thought

of a crash, an explosion. They were going down for a landing.

At the Flamingo bar Grimes treated himself royally before heading for the banks of elevators at the end of the glittering lobby. Brewer's rooms were on the eighteenth floor. The thick carpet along the corridor absorbed any sound he made. At every step he decided to take two backward. Instead he approached Brewer's door and knocked.

The door swung open and a stocky tanned man in a pink sports shirt with thin, glittering gold-rimmed glasses nodded slightly. He was in his forties, about Grimes' own age, maybe a bit older. It was hard to tell with some men like this Brewer who lived well. He had a short, beaked nose, strong flaring little nostrils, and a cleft chin. His face was smoothly composed but his eyes were steely, alert, a bright blue.

When Grimes said, "Mr. Brewer? My name is Grimes, Filo—" Brewer abruptly motioned him in and closed the door. Grimes sighed and handed him the briefcase. Brewer took it and retreated deeper into his suite which was rich and imposing and inviting, overlooking the breathtaking beach below.

Brewer had the box out and was unwrapping it calmly. A cigaret was burning in a seashell on the low table. Brewer said: "You opened it, of course."

Grimes was rattled for a moment.

"Wasn't I supposed to?" He had been doing a lot of thinking.

Brewer seemed neither hostile nor friendly. He looked into the box, shoved the top back on. "It's all here," he said. He added lightly: "You're an honest John."

Grimes shrugged, puzzled. Something like tension held him there. Brewer was appraising him.

"Drink?" he said, abruptly.

Grimes nodded, dry suddenly.

The other went to a curved maple bar across the suite. When he came back with a tall cool glass Grimes took a long swallow. One of these days he would be able to look at the stuff and walk away but not now. Maybe the Greek had really started something when he had sent him down here.

Brewer put down his glass and lit a fresh cigaret. Grimes took one. "Sit down," said Brewer. "Look. You've done a good job. You could have taken the money and beat it. Maybe you're wondering whether we planned it this way or not." The golden brown hairs curled on the backs of his wrists.

Grimes grinned. So the Greek knew what was what all along. "Suppose you tell me why. Maybe I'm waiting for you to hand me something to deliver back to Phil. And if it's hot like your bundle of money there, maybe I'll take it to the Greek and maybe I won't."

Brewer laughed, shook his head.

"The money's not hot at all. But we won't go into that. I do have

something for you to take back. If you agree you earn another, let's say, five hundred this time."

Grimes stubbed out his cigaret.

"I don't have to play games," he said. His sickness of the past two years crowded his mind again. "What's it all about?"

Grimes was tense again. Brewer stared at him quietly, smoke curling from his nostrils. There was an odd quality about him that disturbed Grimes. He couldn't make it more definite in his mind.

"Let's put it this way," said Brewer. The smooth voice cracked ever so slightly. "You return this box empty, see, like this." He upended the box, left the bank notes flat on the table, rejoined the box parts. He pushed the paper and string towards Grimes. "Wrap it up," he said, "and return it as is. And there's five hundred dollars in it for you."

Grimes gave a little yip of laughter and rewrapped the box. "Sure thing," he said. He laughed heartily this time and put the box back in the briefcase. He wasn't even going to try to figure this one.

Brewer took five one hundred dollars from the sleek wallet in his hand and held them out to Grimes who put them away. There was no sense to it at all. He stared for a moment, waiting. Brewer walked to the door. "I guess that's all," he said. "And thank you. Say hello to Phil for me, will you?"

He didn't shake hands.

Grimes nodded dumbly and went out into the hushed corridor. Downstairs in the lobby he went straight to the bar and gave himself another double scotch with plenty of ice. The slow spin in his head continued its motion. There was no sense to it at all.

It was only when his plane exploded a half hour out before landing time at International did it begin to make any sense. The only way he could explain it—his survival that is—was simply that his time had not yet come. They had been losing altitude prepping for the landing and were over a hilly wooded area when all hell broke loose. There wasn't time to think or pray or anything, except that he did get one flash of the past. Or perhaps it was the red ball of the universe exploding. He recalled vividly the fat insurance policies he and Laraine had taken out on each other. No doubt she had kept paying the oversized premium. He was worth at least \$100,000 dead. Before he lost consciousness he willed it to her by wish. In any case, she was his beneficiary.

When he woke up he hadn't the vaguest idea where he was. But out of two slits in bandages round his head he finally saw the nurse puttering around the room, a large ward, and across the way a row of beds, some occupied, others empty. The walls were faint backdrops for his pain, and there was no moving a muscle. Both legs were up in

traction and he shuddered with every breath he drew. But the miracle of being alive made a choking laugh start deep down in his aching belly. He couldn't think, could hardly breathe but there were foggy visions of faces swimming around in his cranium. "Honest John," Brewer had said. And before him the Greek had slipped him drinks and advice and philosophy. And help around the place to pay for his drinks. And before even the Greek there was Laraine who had been impatient for money, luxury, and the glamor of high living. And the large, too large, insurance policy.

And then for a long time it seemed he just floated off into silence, anonymous space, where there was no one, nothing, no black, flaming explosion, jolting fearful plunge to the ground. When he finally came to again he was clear-headed and he realized the miracle was real enough. He had survived the plane crash.

But it was weeks before he was able to move about. By that time reporters had come and gone, and he saw by the newspapers all that he wanted to see. There had been the usual publicity attending an air crash. Civil aeronautics were still investigating. But there was nothing in the pile of papers to help anyone realize there had been deliberate sabotage. There was only one thing now that made real sense. He was listed among the known dead.

Harold J. Grimes, said the paper, of Boston. Then a day or two later a wire photo of Laraine as beautiful as ever even in the smudged print, the grieving widow. And some enterprising reporter had followed up with her story. There was nothing flattering about him in it. He had deserted her two years before—an unfortunate case of alcohol. And then the punch line. The insurance company had settled with his widow. The original emotion over the half dozen survivors had died down. Later copies featured a line or two. Finally nothing.

It was the first time in his life that he smirked with satisfaction. In due time he would be out of the hospital. He wondered how the Greek and Brewer had managed it. No doubt they had slipped someone aboard with a time bomb between Miami and International. It could have been done that way while he sat befuddled, wondering why over an empty box. It was foolish to try to figure anything further when the truth stared him in the face. Laraine had wanted it this way.

Somehow or other—and this was the irony of the whole thing—the doctors or somebody had given him somebody else's name. For weeks nothing had been said and he had said nothing. He got a wry kick out of the name they had given him: Rufus Marley. Marley's ghost. And who was to say different? Apparently, there was no one around to say he was not Marley. It was an

eye opener to see how no one paid much attention to him after a certain length of time. He knew by this time he was in a city hospital—Before his day of discharge he laid his plans. When the time came he simply walked out. No doubts, no fears, no hesitation. He knew that the ward nurses and the others would put it down to the effects of the crash. If there was anything in the papers about it, it went unnoticed. He knew there had to be a pawnshop somewhere. He found one and bought a squat, ugly-looking gun. He cleaned it, oiled it, then went out again and bought some clothes. And took a bus. In eight hours he was back on Morton Street. He avoided the Greek's, stayed in the shadows. And watched Laraine's apartment. For a day he saw her come and go. He shivered once but then the sight of her left him cold. Only his fingers tightened on the butt of the gun. He thought of the Greek and Brewer. There was time for them.

There was a hint of summer in the air when he entered the apartment house after dark. It was after eleven. He knew exactly which floor, which door, of course. He took the self-service elevator and went up quietly, casually. There was no one in the corridor. He knocked on the door and waited for her step. When she opened it and saw him it was worth the \$100,000 to see the expression on her face. He shut the door fast behind him.

"That's right," he said softly. "Sit down. I'm not going to waste any time. You know what I want."

Her face had gone fishy white beneath the make-up. She was not beautiful at all now. In fact she was downright ugly if acts of evil make a person ugly. She had been watching TV for the set was on and there was a drink on the bar table.

"I can't believe it," she said. She shook slightly. The hungry look he was familiar with had left her face. Her eyes were glassy now, her sensuous lips unglued. But the lush, long-limbed beautiful figure that had driven him to distraction was still the same, even more so beneath the revealing thing she wore.

No doubt he was staring at her grimly for she wet her lips. She was talking before he realized what she was saying. "I've got the money, Harold. You probably know the insurance policy—I thought, we all thought, you were killed!"

"We—?" he grinned. "Who's we? Brewer? Or my great pal, Dmitri Filodorus, the man with the heart? I should have known the face and the drinks didn't go together. But then I never did catch on to you either, did I, beloved? Until it was too late."

She stood up suddenly. There was a pleading in her face. He saw it coming. The sensuous movements of her hips, the pure white mounds of breasts lifting with feeling—for him.

Harshly, he knocked her back.

"Darling—" she whimpered. The hatred seeped through the love. She couldn't give up so soon. Her thighs came exposed, the white flesh gleaming, mocking him. She forced a flame into her movements and spelled it out for him without a word.

"The money!" he swore. If she didn't stop he would kill her. She shuddered. Furiously, she sat up. "You know I haven't got it here."

He slapped her twice. Again she fell back exposed. She laughed this time. With feeling. A light of something deep and terrible danced in her eyes. Dark eyes now it seemed. Once they had been soft and bright. She was a stranger to him now.

He was as cold as ice. She sensed her defeat even before her eyes flickered once. "I've got maybe a hundred—in small bills." She stood up quietly. "I'll get it, Harold." She hurried almost demurely into their bedroom, her bedroom. His chest was suddenly chilled. He crowded behind her and ripped the bills from her hand. And under a set of lingerie he fingered another note—a five hundred dollar bill.

She swore.

"What if I tell the insurance company you're alive!" she screamed. He swayed a bit, tempted to strike her down.

"Whichever way you think best," he said. He knew she'd back down. She was too greedy, had gone to too much trouble and risk. Besides, he was in a position to pull the rug

out from under her, the Greek and Brewer. It would be a pleasure to see Brewer squirm. Suddenly, it was Brewer more than either Laraine or the Greek who brought the hate oozing out of his pores. There was no way out though for her except to pay—and try to get him off-guard. She was thinking of it all right when she said sullenly, "You win. Tomorrow I'll go to the bank."

He brushed her aside. "I'll get in touch with you. You'll do as I say, understand?"

"Get out!" she said fiercely but her expression was hopeless.

The next night he called her on the phone.

"I've got the money," she said in answer to his question. "Put it in a paper bag," he said, "and go to the corner of D and West and cut across the park. It's ten o'clock now. Be there in half an hour."

He hung up. He knew that she would be there with a paper bag. And in the bag there would be a gun. And even if she hadn't made any such plan, the Greek was already aware of his existence, and Brewer. And perhaps one of them was already there. He had given them all plenty of time to meet. But he wasn't cut out of the same cloth they were. He also had time to think. Seeing her again had given him a jolt. Running a crooked line between them and the law was not in his book. All three at one time or another had called him an Honest

John. He pushed aside the thought of the money and the vistas it opened up. At an outside phone booth at the corner drugstore he dialed the police number 1212. He didn't think much of the name—Rufus Marley—someone at the hospital had given him, anyhow.

When he came out of the phone booth he was suddenly parched for a drink. He turned into the drugstore and ordered a malted milk. He stared with disbelief at his reflection in the mirror. It had been a long time since he had even thought about a malted milk.



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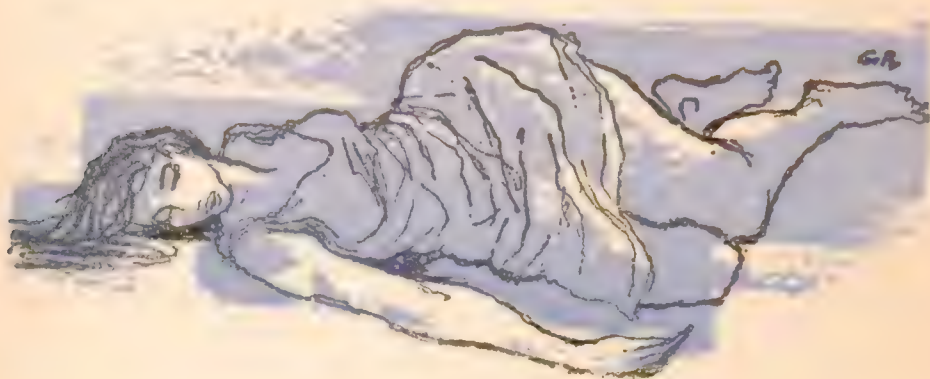
More than one million Americans are living proof. Remember . . . your contributions helped save many of these lives. Your continuing contributions are needed to help discover new cures and, ultimately, the prevention of cancer itself • Remember, too, if you delay seeing your physician, you drastically cut your chances of cure. Annual checkups are the best way of detecting cancer in time • Guard your family! Fight cancer with a checkup and a check.

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

He was sensitive. He abhorred violence and suffering but . . . he picked up the phone and made another appointment.

LADY KILLER

BY HERBERT KASTLE



NO ONE KNEW how he suffered. Most people were callous when it came to hurting others, but not he. Most people could accept pain in others and pain in themselves—mental and physical pain—but not he. Which was the very reason he was involved in this unpleasant business. If he'd been part of the herd, he would've adjusted to having lost his job—even after eighteen years—and found another. But he wasn't part of the herd. His soul had shriveled in the employment agencies; his already

fragile personality had disappeared; he had crumbled and fled.

And so the only way out, the only other field in which he had any sort of experience, the only chance to be his own master, was answering these advertisements.

He nodded with as much satisfaction as he could muster as he approached the East Side apartment house. Nice. Very nice. But it had a doorman. So he strolled around back and found the service entrance and walked down a concrete ramp, through a courtyard, into a well-

lighted basement. The freight elevator was there, and empty. He got inside, pressed the button marked 3, rode upward. His stomach began to churn, the palms of his hands to sweat, his mouth went dry. Weary-some, worrissome, ulcer-producing work. And sometimes hardly worth the effort.

But, as he stepped onto the third floor, he reminded himself of the bright side. He'd not only managed to retain his apartment and his comfortable habits, but had saved a considerable sum besides . . . all this because his income over the past three years had averaged fifteen thousand a year. Which was seven thousand better than he'd been making at Guison Periodicals. If there was a bad day every so often, well, it had to be expected.

He walked along the hall, looking for 3-G, hoping the woman would be elderly. He preferred dealing with elderly women. He reached the door, adjusted his tie, wiped each black shoe carefully on the opposite trouser leg, and pressed the bell-button. Chimes sounded; footsteps approached; a peephole clicked and an eye looked out at him. "Yes?" the woman's voice asked.

"I'm Mr. Devers. I called about the RelaxAcizor and Stauffer Reducing Table you advertised in Sunday's *Times*."

"Oh, yes." The peephole shut, the door opened, the short, stout, middle-aged woman said, "Come in."

He stepped past her, then paused to allow her to precede him. They walked down a long foyer and into a beautifully-furnished living room. But he was too nervous, too upset to truly appreciate it. She wasn't more than forty-five, perhaps two or three years younger. He did so regret that! But he'd regretted it before, and never allowed it to stop his doing business.

She was looking at him, a faint smile on her plump, kindly face. "I must say you don't seem to need reducing or beauty aids, Mr. Devers."

He flushed. He was a small, delicate man whose hundred-twenty-three pounds was distributed evenly over a narrow frame. "My wife," he murmured.

She chuckled. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you."

His face remained hot. "Not at all," he muttered.

"Well, I guess you want to see the equipment."

"If you please." And then he twisted his face, pulled back his head, sneezed stentoriously. The woman jumped. He pulled out a handkerchief. "Pardon. Hope I didn't wake or startle anyone?"

"No one to startle but me," she said, and turned quickly, trying to hide a smile. He seemed to amuse many of these women. Perhaps any timid little man would amuse them. He wondered if contempt wasn't part of their reaction. It was an interesting point of speculation, but he had no time to pursue it.

They entered a bedroom. He stopped short at the door. She pulled the compact RelaxAcizor case from under the bed, moved toward where the larger piece of equipment lay against a wall; then glanced at him. He was flushing again. She seemed puzzled a moment; then said, "Oh, dear," and couldn't quite stifle the smile. "If you prefer, Mr. Devers, I'll bring them out to the living room."

"Thank you," he said stiffly, and turned on his heel. Foolish woman! He was a total stranger; he could be a sexual deviate of the worst sort; and yet she took him into her bedroom! She wouldn't be quite so bold if she knew as much as he did about crime in America. She wouldn't be nearly so amused if she'd read *Shock True-Police Cases*, the magazine he'd edited for eighteen years. It had performed a real service in educating its readership against the fallacies of allowing strangers in your home, or your car. This alone had given him pride and purpose in what might otherwise have been sordid and impossible work, especially for a Harvard graduate with a Master's in English Literature.

But he didn't have time for the past. He stepped quickly to another doorway and saw a kitchen. He went across the living room and opened a door—a second bedroom with a bathroom exposed to his view beyond it. They were truly alone.

He moved to the center of the

living room, in time to see her struggling with the reducing equipment. He hurried to help her, took the RelaxAcizor, placed it on the couch. She brought the Stauffer table to him. "You understand, Mr. Devers, that it has to be cash? I don't know you, so accepting a check would be foolish. Two hundred dollars for both machines. That's a wonderful bargain. I paid that much for the RelaxAcizor alone. It's just that I find I haven't the time . . ."

He nodded, patted his breast pocket. "I have the money with me. If you'll just step from the room while I remove my jacket and apply the pads to my arm?"

Again she smiled. He would have liked to answer it, but was far too nervous, far too upset.

She turned away. He drew the foot-long blackjack from its sheath under his left arm, stepped forward and raised it. *Oh God, if she turned and he had to see the fright, the horror . . .*

He was fortunate. She didn't turn. He struck her as hard as he could, which was quite hard since he'd developed a certain dexterity in this type of thing. She made a soft little sound, and folded in an inert heap on the floor. He bent quickly and struck her twice more, groaning as the blood seeped from her smashed skull. Then he wiped the blackjack on her skirt, replaced it in its sheath and straightened. "God," he whimpered, trembling

violently. "God, God, God. . . ."

He put on his gloves and got to work. He continued to tremble and whimper for quite a while, but he searched thoroughly and found both money and jewelry. He then returned the reducing equipment to her bedroom, keeping his eyes from where she lay, and went down the foyer to the hall door. Where he paused, drawing up his strength, his courage, telling himself it was almost over, another moment and he'd be through. The self-admonitions did no good. He continued to suffer, and fear. This was perhaps the worst part of the job, next to actually striking the woman. This was exposing himself at the most deadly moment, a moment which could mean discovery and the horrors attendant upon discovery.

He used the peephole. It gave him a view of no more than three feet on either side. He listened intently. A door slammed somewhere; voices spoke; the elevator hummed; more voices . . .

He'd been through this often enough to know that he should wait no longer. An apartment house was never completely silent.

He took a deep breath, pulled open the door, stepped outside. He hurried toward the side passage and the freight elevator. He met no one, and got inside, and went down. He still met no one—not even a child in the courtyard—and went up the ramp and into the street.

He took the subway to Green-

wich Village, even though he'd planned on answering *two* ads today. He'd found over five hundred dollars in cash, and the jewelry was of the type that Mr. Albertson would be able to dispose of easily—a ring and two sets of earrings, all with small, perfect, blue-white diamonds. He figured he'd made at least fifteen hundred dollars, and this was excuse enough to give in to his distaste, his near-sickness. He would rest a bit, then have a good dinner and go to the theatre. . . .

It was after midnight when he returned to his second-floor studio apartment in the reconverted brownstone on 11th Street. He was relaxed now, pleased with his evening's entertainment—despite not being at all impressed with the drama he'd seen. But he realized his tastes were very high—as high as any professional critic's, since he saw just about every legitimate play, barring musicals (vulgar girle-shows, all of them, basically!) on or off Broadway.

He made himself a coffee Royal, using a little less than a jigger of brandy to a mug of black, spread a few bland crackers with caviar, sat sipping and munching at his desk in the corner of the huge studio room which comprised living room and bedroom. He went over his books.

These were not account books in the strict sense of the term rather they were listings of dates, each with a 1 or 2 written next to it, in-

dicating that he had successfully answered either one or two advertisements that day. They did not, of course, show how many times he had visited prospects, only to find other people present. That meant he'd had to suffer through an embarrassing examination of the articles offered for sale—reducing equipment, most often, since he'd found that expensive reducing equipment was usually purchased by well-to-do matrons in their late forties and onward. Most tired of the self-applied methods in short order, returning to the comfort and camaraderie of their beauty salons, creating fresh listings in the Merchandise Offered columns.

Fifty-seven separate jobs, he mused. Fifty-eight, counting today's. He had accomplished fifty-eight jobs in the past three years. And what about the police?

He rose and put away his little notebooks. He didn't like thinking of the police. Not that they worried him. They hadn't come close to catching him, because they'd never had an eyewitness to his identity.

Fifty-eight jobs, and fifty-eight silent victims.

He shook his head. That was no way to think after a successful day and relaxing evening. No way at all!

But tonight, somehow, the figure remained in his mind. *Fifty-eight victims*. It was some sort of record, wasn't it? Had anyone else in crime ever killed fifty-eight women?

He went to the bathroom, turned on the shower, took it hot and long. His nerves were acting up again. He musn't think of the fifty-eight. He must think only of how he would continue living and working and enjoying his life. He wasn't a murderer; wasn't even a criminal in the true sense of the word. A killer, a criminal, was vicious, cruel, brutal, uncaring, a sadist many times. Didn't he know? Hadn't he written, edited, directed reporters in writing, of such matters for eighteen years?

He left the shower, towed himself, began thinking more positively. The newspapers had ascribed the jobs to many different people. (Twelve had been blamed on a *woman*!) In one case, a husband had been convicted of murdering his fat socialite wife when he was found to have been carrying on with a slim TV actress. But then again, he deserved it for being that kind of man. In another case, a sister had been brought to trial when it was learned she stood to inherit the murdered woman's estate and had made several attempts to hire a professional killer. She received ten to twenty years, but an appeal was coming up. He hoped she lost, the wish being tantamount to the act in a moral man's eyes.

There were other cases, and other theories; among which he himself had been named a possibility—not as Marvin Wyatt, Jr., who he actually was, but a man described vari-

ously as "medium-sized and slender" or "small and wiry" or "short and powerful" or "small and thin." In about eight of the cases people who had seen him somewhere in the apartment building reported him, among others, to police questioners, and so there was a body of information gathering about him. This meant he would, someday, have to call a halt. But he hoped that day was at least a year off; by which time he would have saved enough money to open a shop right here in the Village—books and records (classical records, of course!) with a sideline in original paintings and good prints.

He got into pajamas, turned off the lights, lay down in bed. No use fantasizing about the future. Tomorrow he had to answer another ad or two. There was that prospect who hadn't been in when he'd phoned this morning. If she answered tomorrow, it might turn out to be his best job yet. The ad had offered a complete reducing-salon of equipment—five separate items, including a six hundred dollar electric bicycle and an equally expensive vibration-and-roller table—for one thousand dollars. Since it was a private party and not a shop, it indicated a more than well-to-do individual.

He was in an excellent frame of mind as he dozed off. . . .

He phoned at exactly nine a.m. the next morning. The woman who answered said that he could see the

equipment at noon, and added "I've already received several offers, Mr. Cross, and I wish to dispose of the equipment immediately. No one, so far, has met my price . . . but they're within a hundred or so dollars of it, and I might just take the best one. You should be prepared to pay cash . . ."

He interrupted to say he would have the one thousand with him, to hand over immediately if the machines were in good shape. "Fine," she said. "Perhaps the worst feature of advertising this way is that those who come expect to take up my time without showing they have the money."

He got her address, hung up, went downstairs and to the bank on Seventh Avenue. He took a thousand dollars from his strongbox—he couldn't very well keep his money in a savings account because of the evidence it might present, though he regretted the loss of interest—then strolled to a cigar shop down the street. Where he made another call, and an appointment to see a Pernigren Vibrator within the hour. He took the subway to Twenty-third Street and walked four blocks east. Every so often he touched his breast pocket. He disliked carrying so much money with him, but if that woman asked to see it before allowing him the freedom of her apartment . . .

He shrugged. It would be back in the strong-box tomorrow, considerably added to if he were lucky.

He wasn't lucky with the Pernigren Vibrator. The apartment was a lovely one, seven exquisitely-furnished rooms on the ground floor, and the woman in her sixties . . . but her obese husband (it was obviously *his* machine) was present, as was a large son and his noisy brat. Marvin Wyat suffered much before making his exit. In fact, he found it necessary to fortify himself with a Rob Roy—"just a *splash* of vermouth to the Scotch, please"—even though it was only ten-thirty. And even the Rob Roy couldn't wipe the embarrassment and distaste from his mind. Imagine, that fool of a man had applied the vibrator to Marvin's backside in front of the entire *menage*! He shuddered, and had a second drink, and then felt it wise to eat a sandwich. He still felt somewhat fragile, and therefore took a cab instead of bus or subway to the address further uptown. The neighborhood was good—not the best, but good. The building was a sedate residential hotel. Which raised his hopes that the woman was considerably older than she'd sounded on the phone. These hotels were full of elderly couples, or widows—wealthy ones.

He strolled around back, found the service entrance, avoided the elevator. In a hotel, it would probably be manned. Instead, he took the stairs, and made it to the fourth floor, slightly out of breath but unseen. And reached the door marked 4-E the same way. Which gave him

some little satisfaction, despite the usual buildup of tension and fear. That little satisfaction disappeared when the door opened. The woman was quite young—no more than a girl, really—dark and pretty, wearing a floor-length terrycloth bathrobe. "I'm Mr. Cross," he said.

"Oh, yes, do come in, Mr. Cross. Pardon my appearance. I was just trying out some of the equipment." She smiled. "Sort of saying good-bye, if you know what I mean."

He didn't know what she meant, but smiled in return. It was difficult not to smile with such a lovely creature. And he wasn't particularly fond of girls—pretty or not. His temperament was such that he had failed to interest them when he'd wanted to, learned to do without them, and finally lost real need during these, his early forties. Or convinced himself he'd lost real need. For when he stepped inside, she stepped back, and somehow her robe parted to reveal a long, white, lovely leg. Despite his usual fear and tension, his stomach-twisting agony of anticipation, he responded to this with a slight increase in pulse—quite a compliment to the girl, if she but knew it, since his pulse-rate was already far exceeding normal.

"I'm afraid I'll have to see the money, Mr. Cross. My time's been wasted by too many . . ."

He took out his wallet and showed her the thick sheaf of twenties and fifties. She then let the door

close, and he was in the sitting room of a small suite. "The equipment is in the bedroom," she said. "You just wait on the divan, Mr. Cross. I'll bring out the smaller pieces first, and you can check them one at a time. Then, after I slip into something else, you can examine the electric bicycle and vibrator-roller table in the bedroom."

He nodded, and followed her to the couch. Where he sat down and watched her walk through a doorway. His nervousness increased. She was too young—not more than twenty-one or -two. He'd never handled one so young, and so attractive, before. This type of girl didn't usually own reducing equipment . . . at least hadn't in his three years' experience. It was going to be a terrible task!

He wiped his face and neck with his handkerchief, and heard her coming. He looked up . . . and almost leaped from his seat. She'd discarded the bathrobe. She was wearing what first appeared to be absolutely nothing to his startled eyes; but immediately afterward he saw she had on a flesh-colored bikini. The reason he was able to identify it was that Elroy Trent, editor of Guison Periodicals' *Blink*, *Twitter* and *Snap*, cheesecake magazines of the more salacious sort, had delighted in shocking him time and again with copies of his trashy monthlies. He would lean over Marvin's desk, point and comment vulgarly, and choke back

laughter at Marvin's outraged demands that he leave. Hateful and obscene animal!

But this girl, while having shocked him, was not at all vulgar looking. Her tall, fully-curved body moved gracefully toward him; her large gray eyes blinked uncertainly. "I hope you don't mind my appearing this way," she murmured. "It seemed like a good idea inside . . . but now . . ."

"Not at all," he said, realizing his expression had thrown her into embarrassment and confusion. "You're going to demonstrate the equipment, I gather?"

She smiled—in relief, he felt. "Yes. You couldn't very well . . ." She dropped her eyes, standing there before him, a RelaxAcizor case in her hand.

"I appreciate it very much," he said, rising courteously.

She set the case down on the floor, opened it, ran the extension cord to a wall socket. She returned, threw the switch, dampened and applied the pads to both thighs. Then she lay down on the couch, smiling at him. "If you would, Mr. Cross?"

He was so taken up with watching the lovely creature—her previous movement, and now her exciting lack of movement—that he didn't understand.

"The dials, Mr. Cross, please."

"Oh, yes, of course."

Her smile remained, if anything grew warmer, and he realized with a sudden spurt of excitement that

she was *pleased* by his obvious admiration!

He knelt to the dials, turned them very slowly.

"As you probably know," she said, "a RelaxAcizor contracts the muscles, thereby tightening and reducing the size of thighs, stomach, whatever area it's applied to."

"Yes," he said, and glanced up at where she lay, just inches from him. He could smell the delicate scent of her hair, the spicy fragrance of her body.

"Increase the power, Mr. Cross."

He did, but gently, so as not to risk causing her any discomfort. A moment later, her long white thighs began to pulse as the muscles activated. He couldn't tear his eyes from them.

"Fascinating, isn't it, Mr. Cross?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes." And then, "I hope you won't think me forward, Miss Edmonds . . ."

"Lila." (Her smile was a delight!)

"Lila. But why would a woman as . . . admirably shaped as you invest in so many reducing and beauty aids?"

She nodded at the dials. He turned them up a jot more. The pulsation of her thighs increased. "Ah," she murmured, "that's just right." She turned her head, her lips only scant inches from his. "I *didn't* buy them, Mr. Cross, though I'm sure you're just being kind."

"Not at all" he interrupted. "Not at all, Miss . . . Lila!"

Her smile was almost tender. "Well, anyway, they were left to me." She sighed. "An aunt who died a few weeks ago. But I tried them all out during the past ten days, making sure they were in perfect condition. You can see that *this* one is."

His eyes returned to the pulsating flesh. "A-one condition," he murmured.

And without realizing it, he discarded any intention of working in this place with this charming girl. For the very first time in three years, he had dropped a job for reasons other than personal danger.

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Cross?"

"Very."

"Then we can get on to the next piece of equipment—a vibration belt."

He shut the RelaxAcizor. She sat up, knees swinging directly in front of his eyes. He rose, but not because he especially wanted to. She removed the pads from her thighs. He watched every move, intensely interested. She stood up, stretched, said, "My, that's one machine I'd like to own, just for the wonderful *feeling*."

She was slightly taller than him, but that was because she wore high heels. Without them, they would make a well-matched couple.

"Now for the vibration belt. It's used, generally, for reduction of the hips and . . ." She dropped her eyes.

He swallowed, and nodded. And

heard himself say "By the way, have you lunched?"

"No. And I am hungry."

He *couldn't* misinterpret that smile! His heart pounded wildly as he said, "Then why don't we leave the other equipment until later? There's a lovely French restaurant just a few minutes from here."

In a warmly impulsive gesture, she placed her cool hand upon his wrist. "Wonderful, Mr. Cross!"

"Marvin," he said, wanting to hear her use his real name—or at least part of it.

"Marvin," she murmured. "But I'd rather demonstrate the vibrator belt *before* we leave. If you don't mind very much?"

Looking at her, visualizing how she would vibrate with the belt, he found it easy enough to say, "Not very much."

They smiled into each other's eyes. She said, "It's rather heavy. I want to bring it out here because . . . well, the other room . . ."

"Quite right," he said, nodding. "I understand. And very wise."

She led him to the bedroom door. He quickly stepped forward and opened it.

"Thank you, Marvin."

"You're welcome, Lila."

They entered the bedroom together. She went to a closet, opened it, leaned inside. "Marvin, could you please . . ."

He hurried over to her.

"Just reach in here and grab it."

He squeezed in alongside her,

felt the warmth and softness of her body, tried to concentrate on finding the machine in the gloom. "I don't . . ." he began.

The next thing he knew he was strangely, inexplicably, lying on the floor. Lila was kneeling beside him, her face terribly pale, her cheeks streaked with tears, her hands trembling. But those trembling hands went under his jacket and pulled out his wallet, and his blackjack. She stared at the weapon, then tossed it aside and concentrated on counting the money. When she finished, she again looked at the blackjack . . . and he noticed a lead-filled wooden truncheon lying on the floor alongside one long and perfect thigh.

His brain began to function. He understood he'd been taken by a clever criminal. He also understood that if he could convince her she was in no danger from him, that he wasn't able to go to the police, he would live.

"I'm the other one," he said, barely able to whisper.

"The other one?"

"Yes. I do the same thing. My blackjack . . ."

She scrambled back and away from him. "You! You're the one who killed those women! They said it was me! You did it! And you must've killed more, many more! Murderer! Dirty . . ."

He tried to raise his voice, tried to tell her how it was, but she didn't give him the chance.

"... rotten murderer! I've hated you from the very beginning! I know what you're thinking—that we're the same. But you're wrong! I never wanted to hurt anyone. My father died and I had no money and men were always trying to use me and I had to get money and I didn't know how and this way . . . But I

never wanted to hurt anyone. I suffered as much as they did. I'm no murderer, no criminal. But you!"

He saw the lead-filled truncheon in her hand, and managed to gather enough strength for one above-whisper sound. He screamed, but it was weak and brief as she commenced to beat him to death.



MANHUNT'S

Gun Rack



S & W

.38 Terrier

The SMITH & WESSON .38 TERRIER is a small, light-weight, five shot revolver. With the two inch barrel it is only 6¼ inches long and weighs only 17 ounces. Chambered for the .38 S&W, .38 S&W Super Police and .38 Colt New Police cartridges, the TERRIER has high shocking power at close range and yet, with its ample grip and round butt, is comfortable to shoot and does not produce excessive recoil. Light and compact enough to be carried comfortably in pocket or purse, the TERRIER is particularly popular with police women and as a side-arm for off-duty patrolmen.

HANGOVER



They found him in the alley behind the club, dead, stabbed with a barbecue skewer. Or I should say they found us . . . because I was with him. And who had a better reason to kill Arnie Gold? I ran!

ALLEY

A Novelette

BY ROBERT PAGE JONES

I GLANCED up into the bright, orange-colored spot and wondered where a slob like me was going to get three thousand bucks.

I squeezed closed my eyes, trying to shut out the thought of what I knew was coming, but it was no good. The thought was inside my head, throbbing hotly, like a knife blade thrust into the brain. My brain still heard the voice over the telephone, *tonight, Phelan. I want three grand by tonight, or else . . .*

Behind me, Lester Davis muted his horn and crept in under the beat, glistening cheeks puffed up like meringue. The trumpet wailed

softly. I laid back four bars, keeping the beat with my foot, then grabbed two fists full of keys for the long romp home.

We finished up high, the sound a thin, vibrating needle of brass piercing the eardrums. Then the silence came, followed by a ricocheting burst of applause.

"Tin Roof Blues!" a slightly thick voice called over the clapping.

One of the girls came in from the bar, put another drink on top of the piano, and took away my empty glass. She smiled. I watched her go, the motion of her expressive, muscular behind keeping time with the

slamming in my brain.

The applause died, replaced by the jangling of glasses and conversation. The orange spot went out.

Sammy Glines leaned his battered bass against the piano, mopped his face with a balled handkerchief. He raised five big-knuckled fingers as a sign for the break. Sam was a frail, up-and-down colored guy, his face set in hard wrinkles like a primitive mask. His tweed jacket hung loosely on him. Sam fronted a three-man combo that included himself on bass, Lester Davis on trumpet and me.

I'm Johnny Phelan. I'm the guy who needs three thousand bucks . . . or else.

Sam fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the tweed jacket, hung one on his lip, and said, "You want some coffee?"

I raised the drink sent up by some anonymous jazz buff, shook my head.

"Crazy, man." He grinned. Sam was the grinning type, but I could tell he was concerned about the booze. So to hell with Sam. *He* wasn't about to get killed . . .

I watched the two of them leave the stand. We'd been working together for years . . . getting nowhere. While I watched, the curtains at the bottom of the cellar steps parted and a girl came in. She came in and stood there, staring over the heads of the crowd, as if she were looking for someone. She

was a big, melon-breasted blond whose thin halter straps looked as if they might break under the strain.

A man came in behind the girl. She said something to him as he grabbed a couple of stools at the bar, threw her fur over the stool next to his, and headed for the powder room at the right of the stand. Our eyes met as she passed.

I wondered what a tomato like that could see in a miserable bastard like Arnie Gold.

2.

I grabbed my drink and ambled over to where she had left Gold sitting at the bar, settled on the stool next to his, and touched his arm.

"Johnny, sweetheart!" He was a plump, unpleasant looking guy who fancied himself an Errol Flynn with the ladies. His face was round. His chin had a deep scar on one side, like the skin of a pear that has fallen onto the ground, hitting a sharp stone. I had the feeling that if you opened up his head it would be over-ripe inside. He wore a neat lavender vest and a large emerald ring. He looked like a more than usually successful used car dealer . . . rather than one of Sonny Mergel's trained stooges. He said, "Long time no see, kiddo. Let me buy you a drink."

"I've got one," I said.

"Always keep one handy, eh?"

He laughed softly at his own humor. "Packing 'em in, eh? Say, that's great, kiddo. Broad I'm with heard about your group. Insisted on driving all of the way out here for a listen. Wouldn't have it any other

"You come to listen, too, Arnie?"

"Well, now, you know me, kiddo." He helped himself to the *hors d'oeuvres*, a specialty at Mincy's, little sausages suspended over a glowing brazier on eight-inch steel skewers. "Always willing to combine a little business with pleasure."

I took a gulp of my drink and looked at him. "I don't have the dough, Arnie. Maybe next week. I'm working on something. Now that we've lined up a couple of club dates, I think I can float a loan."

He shrugged, as if in shrugging he could resolve some problem that bothered him, and licked his fingers. He belched. He grinned at me.

"Listen, Arnie . . ." I felt like a whimpering goddamned dog and I could tell by his expression that he was enjoying it.

He said, "If it was only me, kiddo, you wouldn't even have to ask. But I'm strictly penny-ante. I got no say in the matter. Mr. Mergel don't usually let a guy with your kind of collateral run up such a tab. Especially if that guy has been seen dropping big dough on the beetles. He's given me strict orders to—ah—close out your account."

"I don't have it," I said.

He looked at me again. He no longer resembled a used car dealer. Sauce dripped down his chin and even in the dim light there was a glint of cruelty in his eyes.

He said, "I'll be around awhile. Get it. *Now*."

I took a long time answering. "What happens if I don't?"

"Who knows? That ain't my department. Maybe someday some guy shows up at your door with a tommy gun. You open the door and its like in them deodorant ads. One quick spray . . . and you've got no more worries." He licked some of the sauce from his chin, grinned at me. "Maybe it's not that way at all. Maybe you're just sitting up there at the piano. You put your foot on one of them pedals and . . . *blam* . . . the whole thing blows like a munitions ship. It's like I said. That ain't my department."

I could tell he wasn't kidding. And I sensed by the expression in his eyes that he would like it that way. The muscles in my stomach quivered. The room twirled suddenly and I grabbed one of the cleaned sausage skewers. I stuck the point against the flesh that hung in loose folds over his expensive collar and hissed at him. "Someday, you wormy bastard, somebody is going to open you up like a stinking boil."

3.

Sweat popped out all over his face, but he managed to keep his

eyes fastened on mine and he smiled. He said, "I'll check with you again before I leave, Johnny. Just in case you want to pay me a little something on account."

Mincy, the bartender-owner, started walking down from the far end of the bar. I jammed the skewer into the soft wood in front of Gold and got to my feet. When I turned I nearly bumped into the girl. She was standing back in the shadows, gazing at us openly, her freshly-made-up face expressionless. I moved out of her way as she slid effortlessly onto the stool, her left breast nearly slipping its mooring, pink-tipped and startlingly white against her gown.

Gold leered at her, leaned over and whispered, his fat lips working wetly against her ear. She giggled.

I was a million miles away, out in space somewhere, a speck of dust. I felt a pressure on my arm. It was Les. He was standing beside me. He said, "Forget it, Johnny. Let's play some music."

We went back to the stand.

"Man, you ain't particular who you drink with." Sam leaned negligently against the big bass, his face a study in cynical bordeom, long fingers snapping absently. "I told you. You hang around that creep . . . you're bound to get a whole bunch of trouble."

"Get off it," I snapped. I sat down at the piano, tinkled the keys absently, picked up the beat laid down by Sam's snapping fingers.

There was two fresh drinks on top of the piano. I picked up one of the glasses and drained it. The bourbon slid down my throat like warm wax and plopped comfortably into my stomach. I studied the empty glass and thought, *this isn't the way, friend. This has never been the way. You get potted now . . . and you'll be pouring good bourbon into a corpse. You've got to stay sober enough to run . . . run . . .*

I put down the empty glass, carefully, next to the full one. My hand shook. I looked at Gold. He had swiveled around on his stool, was watching me. I drained the full one. The gentle, warm flush of heat spread from my stomach up through my neck and face. My fingers worked smoothly. I thought, *to hell with Arnie Gold. To hell with beautiful babes. To hell with everything . . .*

"Tin Roof Blues!"

"Let's do it, man." Les fitted a mute into his horn and stepped up front. The hum of conversation dimmed as the orange spot came on.

We did it.

4.

For sixty minutes we romped feverishly through a half dozen numbers without a break, laying back in turn, while Sam or I or Les filled out the melody. At the end of the set we were dripping water.

Sam held up his hand in the familiar sign for a break. I tried counting his fingers. I couldn't. From way off in a sea of sweat and noise I heard the voices and burst of applause. I seemed to be looking at things through cloudy water.

I felt lightheaded and slightly sick inside. I rolled off the stool and walked back to the employee's john, ran the water full cold in the sink, rinsed my face and head. It didn't help much. I still felt sick, and I knew I was going to get a lot sicker. I couldn't see things very clearly; it was like before and the vivid, haunting, foggy memory of it brought cold needles of sweat out on my forehead.

I needed air. At the end of the corridor was a door that led to a service alley where we sometimes smoke during the breaks. I went through the door and stood gulping big lungfulls of fresh air.

I leaned back against the rough brick wall and looked up at a sky sprinkled with stars. They all seemed to have fuzzy rings around them. My hands felt cold and clammy and my teeth were on edge. I wiped the sweat from my face.

There was someone in the alley with me.

The only illumination was from a dull, reddish globe over the door, and my mind was so fogged with booze that I couldn't see whoever it was. But I heard him. The sound that he made sent a chill down my spine and I drew back a step. My

back was jammed against the rough bricks of the building. I couldn't be sure that I wasn't having some kind of hallucination. I was confused. It had all happened within a few seconds after I stepped into the alley.

It was a man, all right. He suddenly detached himself from the deeper shadows, took a step forward with a harsh, shuddering sob and stood there, facing me. He began whispering disconnected things. His voice was strange. I forced myself to look directly into his face and I felt a quick, sickening squeeze in my stomach.

It was Arnie Gold.

He moaned at me, a pleading tone in his voice, soft lips working helplessly. He could not control his saliva. He staggered against me, a confused expression in his eyes, as if he were begging for mercy.

I fought down a desire to run out of there.

His arms were around me, pawing feebly, like the arms of some half-imagined ghost. A shaft of light swept over us. It flooded the alley and threw grotesque shadows against the wall opposite. We stumbled.

I pushed Gold away from me and as I did so my hand closed around a chunk of wood that had somehow gotten between us. My stomach convulsed. He swayed back and forth. He moaned. Then he crashed over onto his back.

I gazed at him, at the stain like

spilled jam on the front of his vest, and I became aware of the wooden-handled sausage skewer in my hand.

That's when the bourbon finally came boiling up out of me all over the place.

5.

I closed my eyes. Ugly images swirled in my brain. I felt as though my breath had stopped, as though my body was functionless, and only the faint tingling of my temples told me I was alive.

When I opened my eyes again, an involuntary sound came out of my throat. The tingling in my temples turned into blocks of ice.

I held the skewer close to my face. I tried to remember if I had picked it up before coming into the alley. Light reflected from a drop of blood on my thumb.

The light!

I turned around slowly.

Mincy Stauffer stood in the open doorway looking at Gold, an expression of frightened confusion on his face, left hand still holding the heavy fire door so that light continued to flood the alley. He said, "Where the hell you been, Phelan? You're supposed to be in there on the stand."

It was a crazy, almost hysterical thing to say.

I wondered how long he'd been standing there. The sound of Les' trumpet came from inside. The

music was like bugs crawling in my brain. I said, "Christ, Mincy. I think this guy's dead."

We were like a couple of lunatics talking to each other. Mincy took another look at Gold, at the skewer held tightly in my hand, and slammed the door. The sound of his feet running came to me like feathers falling in a vacuum.

I squatted down on my haunches and tried to think what to do. It was no use. The last few minutes came crowding back on me, like some crazy junk dream, pushing everything else aside. Les seemed to be playing his trumpet inside my head. Then, over the sound of his playing, I heard the shrill of a siren.

That's when I finally ran.

I came out of the alley onto Melrose Avenue. There was just a scattering of people and traffic there. I grabbed onto a lamp post, vaguely conscious of the people going past, and shook my head to clear away the fuzz. I suddenly realized how cold I was.

A cab passed me and swung into the curb down the block. A man and woman got out. I walked past them and into the still-open door of the cab. When we were moving I said, "Santa Monica and Vermont."

I sighed and lay my head back wearily. I put my fingers to my temples and pushed inward against my head. The booze and shock had dulled my understanding. I closed my eyes.

The cabby woke me. He leaned over the seat and shook my arm and said, "One dollar even."

I paid him and got out. I hadn't remembered giving him an address and it took me a full minute to realize where I was. The realization came as a mild shock. I hadn't been at that precise spot for nearly a year.

When I was sure of my bearings, I crossed the street and walked north for half a block, until I came to a two-story brick apartment house next to a market.

My coming here, I knew, had been almost a reflex action. I fished a key ring from my pocket and discovered that the familiar brass key was still there with the others. I dropped my cigarette and stepped on it, thinking how many times I had lounged around on the sidewalk this way when I'd been drinking and was late for a date, reluctant to go upstairs.

Inside the dark hall, I looked for Laura's name under the row of dusty mailboxes, thinking that after all this time she might have moved.

Laura was Laura Green, a slim, sweet-faced Irish colleen who could make even a bum like me want the normalcy of a home and children and end-of-the-month bills. We'd even talked about it once. But it had been no good from the start. Not because I was a bum—but because she had been willing to have me in spite of it.

We hadn't seen each other for a year.

6.

It was after two A.M. and I knocked softly. When there was no response, I knocked again, then I tried the key.

The room smelled of oil paints and turpentine. The familiar scent of it brought a flood of memories rushing into my brain. I snapped on the light. The room was the same; a half-finished painting stood on an easel near a low table littered with squeezed tubes of paint, brushes, a balled rag and half-empty cup of coffee. I blinked at the light, my brain a living sponge, and said softly, "Laura."

The door to the bedroom was closed. I opened it and looked in. The bed was empty, neatly made, with a couple of throw pillows at one end. I went into the bathroom and splashed my face. I stared at my blank expression in the mirror. Dozens of half-shaped impressions came rushing into my mind.

I filled the basin and emerged my head. I held it under for as long as possible but the impressions remained. When I had toweled off I snapped out the light in the living room and sat down to wait.

I wondered where she could be this late at night; if it was a guy. I decided it was none of my business.

I must have dozed. I don't know how many minutes passed before I heard Laura's key in the door. Maybe it was the sound of the key that wakened me.

My brain felt fuzzier than before. Before I could get to my feet she had come inside and closed the door. She took a few steps forward in the darkness and was bending over a lamp when I said her name.

She twisted around suddenly. Her cry was weak and short—a quick sucking in of the breath. There was still no light in the room. Just darkness and the darker outlines of furniture. She stood very still. Then, before I could make myself speak, she ran toward the door.

I said, "It's me, Laura. Johnny."

I caught her from behind. A scream tore apart her lips, bounced deafeningly inside my head, and we crashed to the floor.

"Please!" She didn't understand.

We twisted on the floor, slamming into a chair, and she got her nails on my face. I said, "For Christ's sake, Laura, it's Johnny."

"Johnny?" There was a tone of disbelief in her voice, but her struggling stopped. She was directly beneath me, her legs between mine, her breath warm on my face.

"Johnny," she said again huskily. "Damn you. Damn you. Damn you—"

"It's all right," I mumbled. I felt kind of foolish. I said, "I didn't think . . . didn't realize I'd scare you this way. I'm sorry, Laura."

I started to get up but her arms held me, pulled me against her. Our faces touched and I could feel the tears on her cheeks. Her hands

moved caressingly. I tried to speak but her lips were on mine, parted, insistent. Her body moved beneath me and the old memories came flooding back again.

After a moment I said, "I'll turn on the light."

"No." She lay there.

"Laura—" I forced her arms away and got to my feet and turned on the light. She looked at me, her breasts and the muscular flatness of her stomach moving as she breathed. She looked at my dirty, bleeding face and red eyes and stained clothes and said, "What happened, Johnny?"

I touched my face. "You scratched me," I said.

She got to her feet, calm suddenly, with the instant reversal of mood that was so familiar to me. "Tell me what's wrong."

I looked at her. The words wouldn't come. I still felt slightly sick inside. I said, "Let's make some coffee. Then I'll tell you about it."

We went into the kitchen. It was small, with barely enough room for the two of us with the vintage-year gas stove and chest-high refrigerator. She spooned coffee into a pot and put it over one of the gas jets. Then we went back into the living room.

Laura sat on the sofa, her long legs tucked up under her, and looked at me. The expression in her eyes caused a quick squeeze in my throat. She was beautiful, her shoulder-length, brown hair com-

plimenting the deeper brown of her bare shoulders. She wore a simple black cocktail dress that clung vividly to her breasts.

I sat there without speaking. I didn't know exactly where to begin, so she started it again by saying, "You scared me out of my wits, you know. I thought you were Jack the Ripper or something."

"After tonight, that's what a lot of people are going to think." I looked at her. "I'm not sure they won't be right."

"It sounds awful," she said.

"It is." I got up and took a couple of quick turns around the room. "I'm in trouble, Laura. Crazy trouble."

"Blond or brunette?" She tried sounding light, but there was no hiding the concern in her voice.

"For Christ's sake," I almost screamed at her. I dropped my head in my hands and it all came back from the alley, like some terrible hangover, only now it was worse, because the booze was wearing off and now I was in my right senses.

Laura said, "For heaven's sake, Johnny. What is it?"

"It's murder," I said softly.

Right away I wished I had used some other word. With the lights on and the aroma of bubbling coffee in the kitchen and Laura sitting opposite me it sounded ridiculous. But it was out now—and she knew it was real, whatever it was, because she didn't laugh or say anything foolish but went out into the kitch-

en for the coffee.

Just telling her about it sent me into a fit of shaking. It was as if I were having some kind of nervous seizure. The words tumbled out, sometimes making disconnected phrases, until I was no longer sure myself exactly what had happened. Somehow she managed to piece the story together. Then she made me go over everything again, asking questions about every bit of it, right up to the point where I stumbled out of the alley.

When I had finished for the second time she smoothed back my hair and kissed me and said, "You poor baby . . ."

"Goddamn it, Laura. I don't want your sympathy. I don't even deserve it. I've been a stupid, god-damned fool . . . but knowing that isn't going to help me now."

"I know." She got up and went to the window. "Do you think they will be looking for you."

"They'll be looking for a killer. And they'll obviously figure I'm him . . . the police and Mergel's stooges and god knows who else."

"Maybe they *know* who did it, Johnny. You can't be sure."

"Sure enough to keep running, baby."

"Johnny—"

"No, listen. I'm a bum, Laura, a slob. A booze-head piano player in a second rate hangout for weirdos and queers. That makes it awfully easy for the cops. And believe me, they're like everybody else in the

world. They like things easy. My fingerprints are on that skewer. baby, and somebody saw it protruding from my sticky hand. So you can bet your life I'm going to run . . . just as fast and as far as I can."

"You can't."

"The hell I can't."

She got to her feet and dropped down on her knees between my legs. She looked at me, the tears running down her cheeks, and said, "I want you to stay with me, Johnny."

"Listen—"

"No. You listen. I don't care what kind of trouble you're in. I don't care what you used to be . . . or what you're going to be . . . I only know that I want to be there with you. When I let you walk out on me a year ago, I thought it would be the best thing for both of us, that it would give you a chance to straighten yourself out. Maybe it did. But, no matter what happens from now on, I'm not going to let you go again."

"It's no good, Laura." I felt sick.

"Maybe. But that's the way it is." She took my dirty face in her hands and kissed me swiftly and got to her feet. "Now then. Let's think what we're going to do."

"I can tell you what we're *not* going to do," I said. "We're not going to find the guy who knocked off Gold. That's for the movies, baby. We'd only be wasting our time."

"Stop it!" She did another quick

reversal. "Do you think I don't know how bad things are? A few miles from here some man is lying face down in an alley, and the police are going to think you killed him, to say nothing of Mergel and his thugs. That's why we've got to find the killer first. *You've* got to find him. Do you understand?"

She was crazy, and she didn't know what she was talking about, but I loved her. I said, "We'll try."

8.

When I awoke the following morning there was a throbbing in my head and my tongue felt swollen. I squeezed my eyes, trying to shut out the recollection of the night before, but the images only jumped into sharper focus—like motion pictures projected on the inside of my skull by a madman.

I got up and limped into the kitchen, took some tomato juice from the tiny refrigerator, and drank from the can. Laura had bacon frying. She wore a cotton blouse and snug shorts that sent a pang through my stomach like hunger. It was a hunger. One that I'd tried to forget.

"Feel better?" she said.

"Lousy."

"Serves you right. There's a razor in the bathroom. Wash up before the bacon burns."

"You've got a well-stocked bathroom," I said sarcastically.

"And you've got a dirty mind."

She gave me a shove toward the door. "The razor's one you left a year ago . . . remember?"

I went into the bathroom and started the shower. When I looked in the mirror I nearly got sick again. My face was stubbled. My eyes were red from too much whiskey and puffy from too little sleep. I didn't even smell good. I thought, *some dames are velly, velly crazy*

There were eggs to go with the bacon, and more tomato juice, this time in a glass, and black coffee. While I ate I glanced through the paper for news of Gold's murder.

Laura said, "There's nothing in the paper. I've already checked."

"I didn't think there would be," I said. It had happened too late for the morning editions. "What about the radio?"

"Nothing yet."

After breakfast, I put on my coat and went and stood by the door. Laura was in the kitchen. When she came out and saw me she walked over to where I was standing and put her arms around me. We didn't speak for a while. Then she said, "Do you know where you're going?"

I grinned. "To find a killer."

"Johnny—" She touched my beat-up face with the tips of her fingers. "No running. Remember, you tried that once. It didn't work. It never works."

"No copping out," I said. I had been hoping I wouldn't have to lie.

I started to leave but she grabbed my hand and pressed something into it. It was a twenty.

"Thanks, baby." The saliva balled up in my throat. I patted the shorts and got out of there.

9.

Outside, the sun was up full, but it wasn't hot yet. I stood on the sidewalk in front of the grocery store. A woman passed. She looked at my face and I wondered how much of my fear she was able to see there. I made myself relax. I would have to keep moving. In a few hours the afternoon papers would hit the streets. My description would be in them. In the meantime, I decided, I would be less conspicuous in a crowd.

I didn't look for a cab. I caught a bus on Vermont and rode as far as Thirty-Seventh. The twenty Laura had given me felt moist in my hand. I put it in my wallet. If I could get my hands on another twenty or so I could hop a bus out of town, maybe make a start somewhere else . . .

Lester Davis, our trumpet man, lived by himself in a little white stucco duplex just off Thirty-Seventh on Catalina.

Les was a tall, emaciated guy who seemed eternally happy unless you took time to read the sadness in his small eyes. The sadness was for a little song bird named Violet who had had a set of vocal cords like

harp strings. She'd been his wife—and she'd done the vocals for our combo back in the days when we had something. The something, of course, had been Violet. She gave us a sound all our own. One that we'd promoted into a couple of records and some top club dates. We'd been on our way up. Until one afternoon the world stopped for Les.

Two years ago he'd come home to find Violet in the kitchen, sprawled on the floor near a table with a cake she'd baked for him, the gas still on in the oven and the doors and windows stuffed with kitchen towels.

Since then Les had moved slowly, saying little, not seeming to care much about himself or others. His playing lost the style that had made him a good horn man once. But the smile remained an almost pitiful characteristic of his expression.

I rang the doorbell. I figured it would be a long time before he answered but the door swung open almost immediately and Les, in pajamas and a rumpled robe, peered out at me through the screen. "Johnny?" he said, his voice surprised.

"Let me in, Les," I said. "I've got to talk to you."

"Sure, Johnny." Les unsnapped the screen and I went inside.

It was warm in there. Drapes were drawn across the windows. There was an odor of decaying carpet. Besides two overstuffed chairs there was a sofa that looked as

though no one sat on it anymore. A floor lamp with a torn shade stood near the sofa. I sat in one of the chairs and said, "You know about last night?"

"Hell, I was there, remember?" He shoved back in his chair and a spring squeaked. "You shouldn't have run, Johnny. The cops think you did it for sure, now."

"I didn't."

"Hell. I know that."

"And Mincy?"

"He was excited, Johnny. He said he was standing there when you gave it to Gold. You know Mincy . . ."

"Sure." I could hear my own sarcasm. "Mincy would never rat on a pal."

He shrugged. His bones looked as if they might cut right through the material of his robe. He said, "What are you going to do?"

"Get out."

He shrugged again. "Hell. One place is as good as another."

I said, "I need some dough, Les. If you could let me have a few bucks I'd get it back to you."

Les went into the bedroom. He came back carrying his wallet and held a five out to me, the thin smile pulling his lips back sharply, and said, "It's all I've got, Johnny. You know how things have been."

"Not like the old days, eh?" I grinned at him.

Les' smile almost softened. He said, "We had a good sound then, Johnny. We used to rock in those

days."

He was still holding the five. I said, "Keep it, Les. It's not enough to help."

He put the five on the arm of my chair. "I wouldn't hold out on you, Johnny. We go a long way back, you and me, remember?"

"Sure, Les."

He sat down again. "Hell. What difference does it make who killed him? The bastard's dead. That's all that counts."

"No guy is bastard enough to go to the gas chamber for."

"I know. I didn't mean for it to sound like I didn't care what happened." He looked at me, his small eyes like thirty-six point periods. "I just meant that the guy deserved to get it. I've never seen him when he wasn't double-crossing somebody or boozing like a goddamned fish or chasing after snatch. Like the broad he was with last night."

"The cops talk to her last night?"

"She got out of there before they came. I saw her. When Mincy came back in hollering she grabbed her fur and beat it."

Something uncoiled suddenly in my stomach, sending a pounding rush of blood through my system, making me almost sick again. It was something. Weak, worthless maybe, but something—a twig rushing past in a whirlpool. I had to grab for it.

I said, "I've got to find her, Les."

He said softly, "I think I know where you can."

For a moment I just looked at him. It was almost too good to be true. I felt myself shaking helplessly as my mind crammed with half-remembered images from the alley. They were still a blur, a series of flowings and flashings in my mind, like a motion picture spliced together by a monkey. I took a deep breath and tried to stop the shaking of my stomach muscles.

Les was in the kitchen. He came back and handed me a jelly glass with a shot of bourbon in it. "Drink it," he said.

I drank it. It soothed the twitching in my stomach some and I said, "Thanks, Les."

"You want some more?"

"No." I did, though. I wanted a hell of a lot more. I said, "Tell me about the girl."

"I see her occasionally. That's why I recognized her last night. She works for a second-rate plugger who's trying to peddle some of my stuff." He looked sheepish. "Nobody seems to want it."

"Who is this guy?"

"His name's Bernie Duff. He's got an office in Hollywood. The Creighton Building."

"That's on Morningside, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh. Near Radio City." Les' voice softened again. He said, "We were going to write some great stuff once, Johnny. Set the music world on fire. Remember?"

I remembered. It was a million years ago. I said, "Maybe we'll still do that someday, Les."

"Hell. They don't want good music anymore. Not like the old days." He got up and started the record player on a table at the end of the sofa. It was one of Violet's old discs—scratchy from too many playings—but not so scratchy that it covered the honey-sweet tones of her voice. Les was right. Nobody wanted the good stuff any more.

I let myself out, turned around on the porch to say something through the screen, changed my mind. Les was still seated in the chair—but I knew he wouldn't have heard me if I spoke.

He must have listened to that record an awful lot.

10.

The elevator operator in the Creighton Building was a rat-faced little kid with greasy sideburns and a lopsided grin. "Still hot out?" he asked.

"Yeah. Pretty hot." I took off my jacket, slapped some of the dust out, and fished a balled tie out of the pocket. There was a mirror stuck up over the door, twisted downward, so that the operator could see out into the hall without leaving his cage. I twisted the mirror until I could see my face, threaded the tie under my collar and knotted it. I took a look at myself. My eyes were still red and there were puffy black bags underneath but the shave had helped. I rubbed my tongue over my teeth

and grinned.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall . . ."

"That's funny, kid." I looked at him.

He must not have liked the look because he snapped his face back around. The cage hummed jerkily to a stop and I headed down the corridor. When the doors snapped shut behind me, I stopped suddenly, feeling sweat in the palms of my hands. My body didn't seem to want to move. My lips began to tremble and I thought about going back down for a drink.

I knew that if I did I would shoot the whole twenty before the bartender cut me off.

Still, I didn't like the idea of being isolated this way, four floors above the street.

A covey of girls came out of an office and stood twittering in front of the elevator. They looked me over disinterestedly. I turned my face away and continued down the long corridor, opened a frosted door, stepped quickly inside.

Bernie Duff's two room office looked down on Morningside through a pair of grimy, green-shaded windows that bore the legend DUFF PUBLISHING COMPANY. Inside were a couple of wooden filing cabinets stacked high with dusty sheet music, an empty water cooler, a wire basket spilling crumpled cups out onto the floor.

The girl was there. She sat behind a cigarette-scarred desk, her

blond hair piled on her head like a beehive, bored eyes appraising me curiously. She took a long look at my battered face and crumpled clothes and said, "Mr. Duff is out. If you would care to wait . . . I'm sure he will be right back."

I decided the publishing business—for Bernie Duff, at least—was lousy. I said, "How long?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How long will Mr. Duff be gone?"

"Another ten minutes, maybe. He's just stepped around the corner to the bank." She looked at my face again. Her eyes narrowed almost imperceptively. I was sure she was trying to place the face.

I said, "Actually, you're the one I want to see. I want to talk to you about Arnie Gold."

She controlled her reaction. Her nostrils flared slightly and there was the soft sound of intaken breath. But that was all. She said, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I don't know Mr. . . . Gold, did you say?"

I placed myself deliberately in front of the door. I said, "You were with him last night . . . when he was murdered."

"Murdered?" She leaned forward elaborately, spilling part of her breasts through the V of her blouse, and looked at me. "I don't know what you mean, Mr.—"

"Phelan. Johnny Phelan." I stood in front of her. "And don't give me that. I was there, too, baby. Remember?"

"No. No, I don't remember." She rose halfway to her feet. "And where do you get off talking to me this way. You can't talk to me this way."

"You talk to me, then—"

"I'll call the police."

I picked up the phone and held it for her. If she had taken it I would have slapped her teeth down the front of her blouse. But she didn't take it.

There was a moment's pause while her breasts heaved. There was no room in there for teeth. She seemed to be thinking. She sat down again, ringed hands flat on top of the desk, her eyes hard bright. I would have taken odds that the rings hadn't been there the night before. A ripple of nerves went through her. She said, "What do you want to know?"

"Who killed Arnie Gold?"

"I've told you I don't know any Gold. That's the truth."

I placed a hand around her throat, pulled her face up close to mine, and hissed at her through my teeth. I was tired of playing around. I said, "Knock off the crap, sister, or I'm going to split one of those lovely lips. I'm sick, and I'm desperate, and I don't want any more crap. Understand?"

I think she understood. She looked at me pleadingly and I released her throat. She started to cry.

I said, "Now what about Gold?"

"I was with him."

"Why was he killed?" I said.

"My God, don't tell me you think I know anything about that," she said defensively. She took a handkerchief from her purse. "I only stopped in that place with Arnie for a drink. He went back to the john during one of the breaks and the next thing I knew the bartender was hollering about a dead guy in the alley. That's when I got out of there."

"Why?"

"I didn't want any trouble, that's why."

"What made you think the guy in the alley was Gold?"

"I didn't. I mean, I didn't think about it one way or the other, but I knew the cops would be around asking questions. And I didn't want any trouble."

"From the cops . . . or your husband?"

"Listen, mister," She dropped her hands in her lap. "My husband's three thousand miles away. He's in the Army. So quit playing detective. My husband didn't kill him either."

I was about to slap her anyway, just because I didn't like her, when the door opened. A little fat guy smoking a cigar came in, scowled at me, and disappeared through a door with the word *Private* on it.

I said, "Mr. Duff, I presume."

"Questions over, mister?"

"That depends on how many more answers you have."

"I think you had better get out of here."

The door opened again and the

guy with the cigar stood in the doorway eying me. He cleared his throat. Then he disappeared again—like an overweight jack-in-the-box. There was the sound of a phone being dialed and a muffled voice.

I said, "Did Gold talk to anyone during the course of the evening . . . at Mincy's, I mean?"

"Only . . . you," she said a little obscurely.

"You remember?"

"I remember you threatened him at the bar."

"You don't like me," I said.

The door opened again. Duff cleared his throat again and said pointedly, "Mae—"

She grabbed her pad and got up, handling her body contemptuously and provocatively, and said, "Excuse me."

Duff closed the door behind them.

I wondered if she ever had to write anything on that pad.

11.

There were a couple of guys standing in front of the elevator when I came out into the hall. I'd never seen them before, but that didn't make any difference, because right away I knew. It stuck out all over them.

I walked straight ahead, toward the elevator, whistling softly, I knew—but I couldn't be absolutely certain that they did too. It didn't

figure that they should.

One of them was big. He had a big, red face and one ear was twisted like a pretzel. The other one was smaller, but broader, with freckles over everything.

They looked me over carefully as I walked up and pushed the down button. Neither spoke, but the little one flashed a twisted grin. He must have smoked a lot. Even his teeth had freckles. I grinned back and began humming a little tune to myself.

I thought about the call I had heard Duff make a few minutes before, shrugged off the possible implication.

They followed me onto the elevator. When we turned around they were in front of me. I thought, *you're crazy, Phelan. And jumpy. Mergel couldn't have his boys staked out in every building in LA. These guys are probably a couple of building inspectors about to condemn the place . . .*

The elevator operator looked at the big one and said, "Quick trip." "Yeah."

Talkative.

Hell. *I knew.*

When the cage banged to a stop I stepped quickly off and headed for the street. They headed for the street with me. I passed them just as we got to the revolving door. Outside I turned left, toward Sunset Boulevard, and let out a lung full of air. I began to breathe. At the corner I started to turn again, felt

a gentle hand on my sleeve.

"Uh-uh, Phelan. Straight ahead." It was Pretzel Ear.

"Eh?" I tried to look surprised.

"It's a hot day, Phelan. Don't make us work," the little one said conversationally. "Just keep walking."

They knew.

I walked. The three of us walked; two building inspectors and a dead guy out for a stroll. We walked to a parking lot and got into the Cad that the attendant brought around. Then we headed out to La Cienega.

Sonny Mergel spent most of his waking hours in a popular seafood place on Restaurant Row, away from the world and his enemies, where he manipulated lives the way people play the stockmarket. The restaurant was his. So were the people who worked for him. From a cluttered back-room nich he could reach out his arm and point a finger all the way across the country . . .

He was a nervous, small-boned man of about sixty, with gray hair that had receded to a few isolated strands over each ear. His small hands shook slightly. His voice was slight and high-pitched. He said, "You know about Arnie Gold, eh?"

"I know."

"A terrible thing. Terrible." He looked at me over a platter of raw oysters in ice and waved me to a chair. He ate one of the oysters. It made a lump like a goiter in his skinny throat as he swallowed it.

He said, "You disappoint me, you know, Phelan. Sometimes the whole human race disappoints me."

I said, "You'll get your dough."

"Eh? A debt is a debt, eh, is that what you're saying?" He lifted a glass of white wine by the stem and squinted through it at the light. His fingers were pale and clean. He said, "But I'm not referring to money. Money sometimes loses its importance when compared to a human life. I'm referring to one of my employees."

"Gold?"

"That's right." Mergel had come over from the old country when he was a kid. But his voice still retained the faint trace of an accent.

I said, "I didn't kill him, Mergel. If you've got any sense at all, you know that."

"Don't talk to me about sense, Phelan." He ate another oyster. "Don't talk to me about nothing. Not anymore. I'm your friend, remember? I carry you for six months while you try to pick yourself up out of the gutter. All that time you're giving me the big uplift line . . . like a den-father . . . telling me how you're going to straighten yourself out and square things with me. So okay. So I'm a big-hearted guy. So how do you square things? I'll tell you. Instead of living up to your word you're double-crossing your friend and chasing after broads and drinking like a goddamned fish. You drink so much your brain gets like jelly.

You walk up to one of my boys and stick a knife in his gut. And you wonder why I think bad things about the human race."

"I didn't kill him."

"Crap you didn't kill him. There's a guy saw you kill him." He shook his head sadly. "Three thousand bucks down the drain."

"You'll get your money."

"No." He poured some wine into his glass. "No, I won't get my money, not now."

"Listen—" I could feel fear boiling up in my stomach like bad whiskey, spreading sickness through my system, until I could almost smell it.

"You listen. Listen good, slob, so you'll understand what's going to happen to you. Gold was only doing a job. If you had a beef, you had it with me, understand? Not Gold. What you think this kind of thing does to the morale of my employees? I got a big payroll to meet. Something like this comes along, my boys want more money, they get dissatisfied. That works a hardship on me."

"I didn't kill him. How many times do I have to tell you that?" My voice sounded weak.

"I didn't bring you here to talk about who killed him. I'm trying to explain why I got to have you dumped. It's because when one guy like you gets out of line, maybe some other slob thinks he can follow suit, and then I got more trouble than I can handle. You get me?"

I got him. I said, "You want me to tell you again?" My voice sounded strange and I knew that saliva was running down my chin. I wanted a drink.

Mergel speared another oyster, looked at it quiscally, then put it back on his plate. He pointed a finger at Pretzel Ear and said, "Get the slob out of here before he spoils my dinner."

I slumped back in the chair. Even through the fear I felt ashamed. I said, "You miserable little bastard."

For the first time the softness left Mergel's voice. He said, "I want him out of here. Now."

12.

They got me out of there. Pretzel Ear and me in the back seat, the little one driving, cozy.

We drove south on La Cienega, past the Gay 90's and Miceli's and Eddie Arcaro's, then right onto Pico Boulevard. It was getting dark and most of the drivers had turned on their headlights. I looked at my watch. A quarter to six.

The little one caught my eye in the rearview mirror and said, "How old are you, Phelan?"

"Thirty-four," I said.

He shook his head sadly and giggled. "Hell, you've got nothing to kick about. Thirty-four is old, man, old."

It was a bad joke. I'd just reached the point where I wanted to live. I looked out of the window, letting

my hand fall on the inside handle of the door, and tried to figure where they were taking me. I couldn't. But I was reasonably sure that I didn't want to go.

At Sepulveda we turned again, drove north for a half block, and then swung into a gravel driveway that was blocked by a cyclone fence with three strands of barbed wire along the top. There didn't seem to be anybody inside. A light over the gate shone on a sign reading SOUTHWESTERN LUMBER COMPANY and in smaller letters MERGEL ENTERPRISES.

I wasn't sure yet what they had in mind for me. But whatever it was—I knew that it would probably happen inside that fence. Inside, in one of those long wooden sheds that looked like the sheds of a concentration camp, with the barbed fence all around.

My stomach convulsed and I swallowed rapidly to keep from vomiting. I closed my eyes. The small one got out of the car, walked forward to open the gate, his feet crunching rhythmically in the loose gravel. Like a snare drum, I thought—at an execution. He was almost back to the car, on the side opposite mine, when I decided to quit sitting there like a fool waiting for them to kill me.

I opened my eyes. At the right moment I twisted the handle and lunged sideways almost in the same motion. A hand bounced off my leg. I flopped out of the car like a

sack of grain being kicked over a tailgate. My face and shoulder slammed into the gravel. It bit into my cheek and ripped along my chin. I rolled against one shoulder to stop my forward momentum, came to my feet, and ran headlong in the direction I was facing.

A car door slammed. I'm not sure which one. When I came around into the light tossed by the headlights, the little guy was there, one arm scrabbling in the pocket of his coat. I crashed a shoulder into his stomach and he went over on his back. Then I was running again.

I was inside the yard. I ducked down a long aisle walled with stacks of white pine and floored with gravel. My feet crunched loudly. There was the crunch of two more feet somewhere behind me, the little guy probably, and the sound of the car being driven inside. The car stopped. Six feet now. Then the clank of the gate being closed.

I could tell, because they bothered to close it, that it was the only gate. The only open gate, anyway. I'd been crazy to run inside. It was completely dark now. Ahead was a long shed with a loading platform running the full length of the side. Light shone faintly from a small window at one end.

I decided to stay away from the light. I changed directions, winding in and out between the stacks of lumber, deliberately losing myself in a maze of gravel-floored cor-

ridors.

The yard was very dark, with the light from the building just touching it slightly with dusty yellow, but I recognized a dark coat as it slipped quickly past an opening fifteen or twenty yards to my right. I stopped. I was at the end of one of the passages, about thirty yards from the fence on the side of the yard opposite the gate, and for a moment I had a crazy impulse to run for the fence. But I remembered the strands of barbed wire at the top . . .

I crouched down in a pocket of darkness. An icy wind seemed to be blowing but I knew that it was my own chilling fear. There was an unnatural silence.

The north side of the yard was as quiet as the south side. No one was in sight, but far down one of the corridors between two lines of lumber stacks I could make out the dark outlines of a lumber carrier parked near the fence. If I could get to that, if I could get up on top, I could jump over the fence without ripping myself to shreds on the wire.

I straightened, and the slight disturbance of my feet in the gravel was like rocks being dropped into a metal pail. I crouched down again as a voice said softly, "Jim?"

"Here," the answer came from the south side of the yard.

I tensed and waited. One of them was walking toward me now, summoned by the sound my feet had

made, certain that he'd found his man. But he advanced cautiously. The shuffle of cinders where his feet were walking was broken by long periods of silence. I could see him in my mind as he came forward, a dark, slightly hunched figure pausing at the end of each stack of wood to search the darkness between—his gun extended like the probing antenna of some poisonous bug.

Fear bubbled in my stomach and the world beyond the fence ceased to exist. This was my world now—this dimly-lit lumber yard where I would probably die.

While I waited I couldn't help remembering many things. I didn't remember them in detail, but as a series of disconnected flowings in my mind: Laura's face came to me, and an image of one of Mergel's hands holding an oyster, and something that Les had said earlier in the day flashed across my brain . . .

There was a sound from the south side of the yard, a soft swearing as if someone had banged his shin, and then all was silent again. I was almost sure that there were other trucks next to the lumber carrier, on the other side, some with what looked like tarpaulins over them. If I could slip into one and lie down . . .

I began to rise just as one of them stepped around the lumber behind which I had been hiding. For a part of an instant neither of us moved. Then I sprang at him, the fear that

had been balled up in my throat rushing through my teeth in a snarl, and I closed my arms around his waist. It was Pretzel Ear—the big one.

A gun barrel glanced off the side of my head and we grappled to the ground. Gravel sprayed my face. A hand came out of the darkness and grabbed my throat. My breathing stopped and I could feel the pounding rush of blood trapped in my head. He brought the gun up and I saw its dark outline in front of my face. I grabbed for it with both hands, the arm against my throat supporting me, and managed to wrench it free. I swung blindly at where I thought his head should be and missed: I swung again, my lungs bursting, and felt the gun land with sickening force against his face. I had the range then. I swung again and again until I felt his face go soft under my blows. I was still swinging as the other one came running up and started shooting at me.

He fired twice and the sock of the second slug slammed me over on my side before I could pull the trigger on my own gun. It rocked and jumped in my hand—but he was so close that I didn't have to aim. He twirled once and went to his knees, his side toward me like a duellist, only a few feet away. He sagged forward on all fours and I emptied my gun into him before the strength left his arms and he collapsed completely. I couldn't

see him move, but the gravel scratched faintly beneath him as the life left his body, and then there was only the sound of my breathing.

13.

After a while I got to my feet. It hurt to stand. Blood flowed from a hole somewhere in my side, soaked my shirt and trousers, ran warm and sticky down my leg. I struck a match and took a look at Pretzel Ear. Then I started walking toward the shed.

I thought about trying to drive away in the car, but I knew that I couldn't. My head spun dizzily and the sound of my feet seemed to be coming from the bottom of a deep pit. I had to get to a telephone. I had to call Laura. Laura would come and get me, take me to her place, and I'd sleep for a million years.

I half crawled up the steps to the loading platform. My feet echoed off the heavy planks. The light I had seen earlier came from a tiny office. I peered through the dirty window. The office was cluttered with furniture and loose papers. A phone stood on a battered desk.

I spread the tail of my coat against a pane of glass and smashed it with my fist. Then I opened the door inside. I picked up the phone and tried calling Laura. When there was no answer I looked at the electric clock on the wall. It wasn't yet

seven-thirty. She wouldn't be home for at least another hour.

I looked up Sam's name in the book and tried calling him. My body ached and the time between rings was like a million years. When he answered I told him where I was and asked him to drive over there. That's all you ever have to do with Sam—just ask.

I don't remember hanging up the phone. But I remember the darkness. I remember spinning, an orange ball exploding in my head, as faces came at me out of the darkness. There was Arnie Gold licking blood from his fingers, and there was Pretzel Ear with a gun, and Laura was there, and Mergel with a platter of oysters, and a blank face that kept trying to talk to me but couldn't. Before I could recognize the features on the face there was only the darkness again.

I opened my eyes and looked at Sam.

He said, "You dying, man?"

I tried to grin but it hurt. "I'm okay."

"You're bleeding like you're dying."

"I'll try to keep it off the upholstery," I said.

He didn't think that was funny. He found a white first aid box in the corner and taped some gauze clumsily over the furrow in my side. With some of the blood cleaned away it didn't look too bad. But he had to help me down to his car.

He had parked out on the street. It was a long walk. When we were moving again he said, "We got to get you to a doctor."

"I'm okay, Sam." I told him how to get to Laura's.

He glanced at me sideways. "I'll take you anywhere you want . . . after we see the doc. I've got a friend that's a doc. He owes me a favor."

"Thanks, Sam." I put my head back and closed my eyes. The faces came at me again. They slammed around inside my skull like ping pong balls dropped into a bucket. I opened my eyes.

Sam punched a button on the car radio, twirled the dial, got a music station. They were playing a disc by a small jazz group. A clarinet and trombone and bass hung in the background, paving the way for the trumpet man, while the piano laid the basic riffs. The sweet sound of it made my stomach flop.

I squeezed closed my eyes and said, "Turn it off, Sam."

"Huh?" He looked at me, long fingers thumping the steering wheel absently, keeping time with the beat. He loved it. It was his life.

"Just turn it off," I said.

"Sure, man."

The faces were coming at me again. Even with my eyes open they rushed at me through the windshield like white-winged birds: Gold, Laura, Mergel—and the blank face. The one without features. It started as a tiny white

speck and came right at me, gaining size and dimension, sucked up by the cones of our headlights. I pushed back in the seat and threw up my hands. But it was too late. This time I knew. And I realized that I'd known all along. I'd known when I was riding down in that elevator with Pretzel Ear . . .

I touched Sam's arm and told him where we had to go.

I could see by his expression that he thought I was crazy. He said, "You sure, man? You got to be sure about a thing like that."

That's when I told him the rest of it.

14.

Les was sitting in the chair where I'd left him that morning, listening to the same recording, his eyes closed. His trumpet case was on the floor next to the chair. He was still dressed in the robe and pajamas—even though he would be due at Mincy's in an hour.

The sound of Violet's voice drew my stomach up in a knot. We had made some wonderful sounds—the four of us. Now there would be only two of us left.

"Les," I said before he looked up. We had come inside and were standing by the chair.

"Johnny." His eyes narrowed. "And Sam. How goes it, Sam?"

"Fine, man."

I said, "You should have told someone, Les. You should have told

me or Sam . . . instead of letting it eat you up inside."

He looked at me imperviously. It was already too late. He said, "If you're talking about Gold, he deserved to die, Johnny. So don't give me any do-gooder lectures. I'm sorry you had to get involved . . . but don't give me any lectures because they'll just make me puke."

"No lectures," I said. I put a hand on his shoulder. "You want to tell us about it? You want to tell us about Violet?"

His eyes blinked and he looked at me. "You knew about that?"

"No. I didn't know, Les." I shook my head. "But a man has to care an awful lot to commit murder. You cared only about Violet."

"I loved her," he said.

"Sure." I wanted to end it and get out of there. I said, "I might have gone right on running, Les, if I hadn't realized that you were the only person who knew that I would be in the Creighton Building when I was. That it had to be you who tipped off Mergel. Why?"

He looked expectantly at me. "You said it yourself, Johnny. Remember? You said no guy was worth going to the gas chamber for—even your friend. The cops were willing to pin the whole thing on you. Only I was afraid to talk to the cops . . . so I called Mergel instead. I figured if he . . . took care of you . . . the cops would consider the whole thing closed."

"You bastard," I said. I was sorry

the moment I said it. He wasn't a bastard. He wasn't anything anymore.

He got up and tried to hit me but I shoved him back down into the chair. He was frail and as light as a scarecrow. He flung his face forward in his hands, shoulders shaking, his words like the sound of fabric tearing. He said, "They'd been seeing each other for months. When I found out I went crazy. I couldn't stand the thought of that filthy . . . he was no good, Johnny . . . my god, you know yourself he was no good."

"So you killed your wife."

"I told you. I was half out of my mind. I didn't mean to kill her. We were . . . in bed . . . and I smothered her with a pillow." His voice made ugly sounds when he talked. He looked down at his hands. "Then I stuffed towels in the cracks in the kitchen and turned on the gas and when the room was filled with it I went back in and pumped some into her lungs."

Behind me Sam said, "Easy, man. Play it easy."

"I thought it was all over then. It wasn't. When Gold came in last night and I saw him putting his hands on somebody else's wife . . . making somebody else miserable . . . I got to thinking how easy it would be to kill the bastard. I probably would never have done anything if I hadn't been standing in the alley when he came outside. He

said he was looking for you. He had one of those goddamned skewers with him and he was eating the sausages off of it."

I said, "You don't have to talk anymore, Les."

He didn't seem to hear me. He said, "I took the skewer away from him and stuck him with it as somebody else opened the door. I guess it was you. I was trapped then. Gold just stood there . . . looking at me . . . the skewer sticking out of his stomach. I ran. I went around and came in the front entrance just as Sam came back to the stand."

I said, "You ready, Les?"

"What now?"

"The police." I touched his shoulder. "We'll have to call them."

"No." His eyes had a curious mixture of plea and threat. "I don't want the police in here." He had lived here with Violet.

"You want Sam and me to drive you downtown?"

He nodded and went into the bedroom to dress. While he was gone Sam took another look at my side. It was a raw flesh wound, but not too serious. Sam said, "Where we going to get another horn man like Les?"

I didn't know.

When Les didn't come out we went in for him. It wasn't a bedroom. It was more like an attic room where unused and unwanted things were stored. There was an old iron bed and a sagging dresser with a framed photograph of Violet on it. A frilly nightgown was tossed over the back of a chair . . . waiting for someone. There were pairs of her shoes under the bed and her dresses hung in the closet. There was a scent of perfume in the room, sticky sweet, mingled with the odor of decaying carpet.

It was a place where dreams could grow soiled without much competition from reality.

Les lay on top of the cheap chenille spread. The spread was stained under each wrist. Sam lifted a hand so we could look at the wrist. He must have sliced them both and laid down on the bed. It was already too late. In a way it was as if he had gone to sleep.

"Pleasant dreams, man," Sam said absently.

After what seemed like a long time Sam touched my arm and I went in and called the police.

Then I dialed Laura again.



CHEAP KICKS

They were out for kicks . . . a red convertible, reefers, gin, and a stolen .45 automatic. The blonde car-hop in the red Bermuda shorts would make it a perfect evening.

BY

WILLIAM BROTHERS

ELEVEN O'CLOCK. The lights of the Circle Drive-In cast a bright fluorescent glare for twenty yards in the hot darkness. Eddie Redbow, called Chico, sat at the wheel of his red convertible with two companions, watching the blonde girl who stood at the service window. Silently he munched a hamburger and turned over in his lap a .45 automatic pistol he had stolen. The sultry night boasted a moon to compete with the bright neon that flashed red, red, red at one second intervals: Hamburger, Hamburger, Hamburger.

Mary Anson, carhop, a slender

blonde girl of twenty, was unaware of Chico's star. She watched the light traffic go by on Palmetto Avenue and wished it were time to go off shift. A black and white patrol car passed with two officers, and she wondered idly who they were, where they were going.

Mike Griswald and Hank Sherman, sheriff's deputies, gray uniforms pressed, ties drawn up, just on duty, were on their way to the Merced Lake substation. Silently they envied the motorist with loosened tie, rolled-up sleeves on such a night. The Sheriff was a stickler for correct uniform for his officers, although he, himself, usually looked like a sack of potatoes.

Two miles away, Sheriff Jim Cannon, indeed looking like a sack of potatoes, sat with his daughter Priscilla, a dark-haired, attractive girl of sixteen, in the air-conditioned coolness of the Rialto theater watching a western movie. For an instant he wondered if car twenty-four had arrived yet at the substation. Then his mind went back to the film.

Chico saw from the corner of his eye the patrol car pass and for a second stopped fondling the gun.

"Jesus, put it away," whispered Charlie Barnes, his companion in the front seat.

Chico did not reply. In the rear seat, Dave Newell, his feet stretched out on the cushions, said, "When we going to smoke 'em, Chico, boy?"

Chico was the smaller of the three. A lean, sullen youngster, black curly hair, dark eyes, a smooth complexion not yet fully used to a daily razor. All three were nineteen, broad shouldered kids in T shirts that showed their strong brown muscled arms. Chico finished his hamburger, wadded the napkin that had been around it into a ball and dropped it on the tray.

"Hell, we got more'n a dozen," Charlie said, his voice barely hiding his excitement. "Let's make it a party. Get some girls. More the merrier, eh, Dave?" he turned and addressed the one in the rear seat.

"More the merrier," Dave agreed in a flat monotone and was silent.

"Yeah," Chico said finally, his eyes still on the carhop, "let's make it a party." He rapped his fist twice on the horn.

Mary Anson detached herself from the serving window where she was talking with two other waitresses and came to the car, an old convertible, newly painted a bright red. It was hot. Again she wished it was twelve-thirty so she could go home. She wore red Bermuda shorts and a white blouse, the uniform required by the management. She was twenty, had an innocent oval face and an attractive smile. She walked as if she knew her figure were good: firm tight breasts, a flat stomach, good legs; one of the reasons she had been hired.

She started to take the tray from the car window, saw the gun which Chico had purposely let her see. She stared with a fixed fascination.

"What time you get off?"

Her eyes went to the occupants: the eager-eyed, lanky redhead beside the driver, the towheaded, expressionless one lounging in the rear. Something about their young male-animal arrogance caused a quickening in her, a kind of breathless fright.

She was used to being propositioned; it was part of the job. Something was wrong if she didn't get at least three a night, but she didn't go out with customers, had a stock answer.

"Too late to think about anything but getting some sleep," she replied with a smile. "This job is killing, on your feet all night—"

Chico's right hand snaked up and clamped around her wrist. "I didn't ask about working conditions," he said. "I asked what time you're off."

The force of his grip hurt her. For a short second there was a brief, silent struggle, but she could not pull away. "*Let go!*" His face, six inches away, had a small grin of male triumph. She snatched at the metal tray with her free hand, jerked it off the car door, brought it down as hard as she could on his wrist.

Chico released her with a quick grunt of pain.

"Keep your hands off me, you little ape!"

"See you later, baby!" he said softly. But he didn't know if she had heard. She had retreated quickly back up to the bright glare of the serving window.

In the back seat, Dave did not move. Charlie suddenly guffawed. "Little ape, she called you!"

Chico, nursing his wrist, twisted suddenly in the seat. He grabbed a handful of Charlie's T shirt. "Shut up, you ugly bastard!"

The laughter died inside Charlie Barnes. Half again the size, he was aware of being a little afraid of Eddie Redbow.

Chico released him, turned his eyes back to the figure of Mary Anson at the serving window, who gave them a coolly defiant stare.

From the back seat, Dave spoke. "Take off and smoke our reefers," he said quietly. "She gets off at twelve-thirty when the place closes."

His eyes still on Mary Anson, Chico reached down and started the motor. Slowly he backed out. Then, with a squeal of tires and a spray of gravel, he gunned as hard as he could down Palmetto Avenue.

Jim Cannon walked into the Sheriff's office in the back of the courthouse. The night desk man, a young six-footer in his mid-twenties, sat at the radio reading a book, ignoring the occasional chatter that

crackled from the set. He was in shirt sleeves, tie loosened, collar on his well-pressed uniform unbuttoned.

"Evening, Sheriff," he said. "Hot one tonight."

"Evenin', Wes." Cannon ambled around the counter. He was a big man with a full protruding paunch, thinning brown hair and narrow, wrinkled gray eyes. He wore a cotton suit that bagged at knees and pockets. He picked up the book, grunted, put it down. "Corporation Law," he said. "Now, that's somethin' I wish I'd done. Studied law. Might have gotten myself somewhere."

"You're up late."

"Took Prissy to the late show. Air conditioned. Double feature. I sorta go for them Westerns." He pulled up a chair and slumped into it. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"What did you do with the young lady?"

"Left her drinking Coke and giggling down at Emmett's Drugstore. She met some friends. Swear to God, Wes, I don't understand sixteen-year-old girls. Can't even understand the language they talk."

"That's because you ain't sixteen years old."

"No, reckon I ain't. Sometimes I think having a daughter is the toughest job there is. So much can happen—so much—" He shook his head. "Scares me a little."

"They any different than they

were forty years ago?" the Deputy asked.

"Well, that's the long term view. Maybe they ain't. But kids today got fast cars and life's pretty easy and they only seem to be looking for cheap kicks." He sighed. "Maybe I'm getting old. What you got on the blotter?"

The Deputy got up and went over and brought the book back. "Nothing much. Family fight out in Laurel Woods. Sam went out and patched it up. Accident out on 101. Highway Patrol's there."

Sheriff Cannon took the register but did not look at it. "You go back to your studyin', Wes. I'll just rest myself here for half an hour. Maybe by then them kids will be talked out. Now this picture tonight was real good. These cowboys are bringin' this big herd up from Texas. Well, they—"

The Deputy pushed his law textbook aside and leaned back to listen to the Sheriff, a faint, patient smile on his young face.

It was only after the other carhops had gone that Mary Anson began to think about the boys in the red convertible. It was her night to stay until closing. "See you later, baby." Suppose they came back? When she'd told the other girls about the gun and that boy grabbing her wrist, they'd agreed it was a dirty shame. Somebody ought to call the police. But Jake, the fry-cook, who'd had his brushes with

the law, was against that. And the girls had gone on to discuss some of the more overt passes they'd received.

She had been reassured by their talk. Now, with the Drive-In lot empty, she began to worry about walking home alone. She watched the few cars going by on Palmetto Avenue. It was only a few blocks, but you never could tell. She wished Mr. Johnson, the manager, would stop by. Jake was half drunk, as usual. She'd be crazy to ask *him* to take her home.

The three in the car fascinated her in a way she could not readily explain. A little cold spot of fear and also anticipation was lodged under her heart. The dark, curly haired one in front, the silent blonde in back, saying nothing, not even moving his broad shoulders. The big redhead would probably do anything the others told him to do. The boys in California were certainly different from those in Nebraska. The three in the car were really quite good-looking, she thought. It gave her the feeling of being a little out of breath. It was as if she were going down a path that she at once dreaded but was drawn along by some deep primitive instinct she did not understand.

"See you later, baby."

A car came into the Drive-in. then another. Busy, she forgot about the boys. The late show getting out. Perhaps, because of the

heat, more people came than usual. She took orders, collected money, made change, took trays away. And soon the last car was gone, the Drive-In lot was empty again. She looked at her watch. Twelve-fifteen. She'd be off in another fifteen minutes. And as if it had been waiting in the back of her mind, lurking, ready to spring, she remembered again the three in the red convertible.

She went inside where Jake was cleaning the grill and wiping down the sandwich counter and putting food into the refrigerators beneath.

He looked up and saw her standing there. "Busy night, eh, kid?"

She nodded. She hated to ask him to take her home. He was small and plump, near forty with oval lips that were constantly wet. He told dirty jokes, which embarrassed her, and he was always trying to paw the girls. She knew he'd probably get fresh and she knew she couldn't stand being kissed by those wet lips. Still, she didn't want to walk home alone.

She opened her mouth to ask him when he reached into one of the refrigerators and pulled out a half-emptied bottle of muscatel.

"Swig?" he asked her with a wink. She shook her head. He tipped the bottle to his lips and took a couple of swallows.

That changed her mind. She said, "I'd like to leave a few minutes early, you mind? Nothing

more coming that can't come inside."

"Sure," Jake said, "you take off, kid. Been hot today. I won't tell nobody."

"Thanks, Jake." She took off the change pouch around her waist and handed it over the counter. Jake took it and put it near the cash register. She went back and got her purse.

"You feeling okay, kid?" he asked as she came back. "Looking a little funny."

"Thanks, I'm okay," she said.

"Must be the heat. See you tomorrow."

She went out into the white glare of the fluorescents. In the darkness beyond, the moon cast a pale glow over the deserted side streets. Down at the corner a street lamp cast a yellow circle of light. Only an occasional car went by on Palmetto Avenue. Hamburger, Hamburger, Hamburger in red neon flicked after her. Two blocks down, six blocks over. She'd be home. Ten minutes. Foolish, the little lump of fear in her throat. In spite of the heat, she felt suddenly cold. She walked faster, her heels making sharp little tic-tic-tic sounds in the hot night.

She turned the corner, went a block. The residential section started immediately back of the stores on Palmetto Avenue. A car turned the corner slowly behind her at Palmetto Avenue, the muffler giving a soft throaty hum. Her blood

froze. She didn't dare look back. The car approached, headlights grazing the sidewalk, slowed beside her.

It went a few feet beyond her and stopped. She kept her face straight ahead. In the moonlight, from the corner of her eyes, she could see the red convertible, the rear wheels too big.

The driver said, "Well, whadda you know. My little friend from the Drive-In. The one with the body. Want a lift?"

She ignored them, her head high, her heart hammering.

"Give you a lift? You said you were tired."

She was almost even with the car now. She saw the dark-haired driver slide from behind the wheel, cross in front of the headlights so he stood before her on the sidewalk. The quiet one in the back got out, too.

"No sense being unfriendly." He stood before her in the moonlight, his legs outspread, blocking her way, the small smile of male insolence on his face. "We only want to take you home."

"Let me by—!" she started. She felt the one behind take her arm. Chico stepped around quickly and took her other arm. She felt herself being drawn to the car. Panic rose in her like the fiery burst of a rocket and she started to scream.

The slap, hard, brutal, numbed her entire face, cut the scream into a strangled, shocked gasp. She felt

herself pulled into the car, the hard young bodies close on either side.

"We still got a couple of reefers left," Chico said smoothly. "We'll go someplace, smoke 'em quiet."

Mary Anson's bones were like jelly. Terror paralyzed her. She could not summon the will to struggle. There was a vague, acrid smell from the two beside her, something indefinable that mingled in her senses with their raw young masculinity and the hot, overripe night. She was aware the redhead had moved over behind the wheel, they were moving off. She was plummeting down a long dark tunnel with a pinpoint of light at the end that grew suddenly bigger and bigger until it exploded and she knew she was screaming.

The slap jerked her head back. Her terror vanished, gave way to a sensation of hopeless submission. She wished the strong hard fingers holding her arms would bite in until the pain was excruciating, unendurable.

Sheriff Cannon interrupted his recounting of the western movie while Wes Baker answered the telephone. The Deputy listened a moment, then pulled a pad toward him.

"All right, now, let's have that over again, slowly. First, your name and address." He wrote swiftly. "You were walking your dog. Yes, I know it's a hot night. At Clairmont and Olive streets.

You say the girl resisted? She screamed. Three men. You see the license? A red convertible, top down. Larger wheels in back. Could you identify the men? Just young, is all. How about the girl? Young, too. I see, the Circle Drive-In. That kind of uniform. All right. All right. Thank you very much. We'll get a call on the air right away. That's right. Thanks very much." He replaced the telephone.

To the Sheriff he said, "Some kids picked up a girl, forced her into their car. Guy by the name of Harlberg, walking his dog, saw it. Didn't get the license number."

Sheriff Cannon had forgotten about the western movie. His heavy jaw hung slack, the folds of his jowl thick on his neck. He thought of Priscilla down there in Emmett's Drug Store drinking Coca-Cola and a cold finger ran down his spine. He wanted to get up, go down make sure she was still there, but he knew that was foolish.

The Deputy was already at the radio. Of course, the Sheriff thought, it might not be what it seemed. Kids got married young these days. And they had their fights, like anybody else. Maybe the girl had walked out, the husband went out to drag her back. There'd be tears and a reconciliation ending up in bed.

But he knew he was fooling himself. There were three of them. If

the girl wore the uniform of the Circle Drive-In, it was likely they'd talked with her earlier, tried to make a date. Goddamn these kids, he thought suddenly. But swearing would not make the tense feeling, the premonition, leave him.

The Deputy said, "I gave it to the city police and the Highway Patrol. And Jim's in that area. They won't get far. Course, it may be a fluke."

"Maybe," the Sheriff agreed. "But carryin' away forcible is illegal, if I recollect rightly. See if there's anybody at the Circle Drive-In. Find out who the girl is."

The Deputy already had the telephone book in hand. He snapped it shut, picked up the telephone, dialed. The Sheriff watched him from heavy lidded eyes, not moving his heavy bulk in the chair.

"The night fry-cook," the Deputy said when he had finished. "Just closing up. Says a carhop named Mary Anson left about twelve-fifteen. There was a little trouble earlier with some kids in a red convertible. One of the girls said something about a gun. The girl lives at 2022 Olive, no phone. I'll have Jim go over and check it out, boyfriends, et cetera." He went back to the radio.

The Sheriff closed his eyes. Goddamnit, why couldn't they realize automobiles were for transportation, not something to prove their manhood with. Out only for cheap kicks. He suddenly had a head-

ache. The heat, he told himself. He could visualize the area, knew it well. The Circle Drive-In, on Palmetto Avenue, just outside the city limits. Modern place, but like nine-tenths of the drive-in's, the magnet that drew the hot rod set.

Two miles out Palmetto one residential section ended and you got into hills, where the houses were bigger, more expensive. Beyond that was wooded country, isolated country, the lonely lanes, the few houses, the quiet turn-offs where lovers parked and looked down at the thousands of twinkling lights below.

He got to his feet. Cheap kicks. I'm getting old, he thought. Sweat stained the back of his coat between the shoulder blades. His suit hung on him in folds like the skin of an elephant. "I'm goin' down to the drugstore," he told the Deputy. "If you don't get a pick-up in half an hour, pull Thirty-two out of Cottonwood and Twenty-four out of the Merced Lake substation and get them into the hills. And get Jim Phillips up there, too."

The Deputy paused. "It'll take four, five hours to flush out the necking spots up there."

"I know, I know. But maybe tonight we'll get a break. Nine chances out of ten that's where they went. I'll be back."

"Right," the Deputy nodded, and watched the heavy frame of the Sheriff lumber out.

Mary Anson had no idea where they were. They had driven for what had seemed a long time, the hot night wind whipping her hair and stinging her eyes. They went racing down a country road, dark trees on either side silhouetted in the moonlight. They turned off the main road, went bumping down another, finally swerved with a skid of tires into a clearing. The lights went off, the car motor went silent. The only sounds she was aware of were the chirping of insects that suddenly started and a vague creaking from the car as the motor contracted.

The fingers had loosened on her arms but she sat rigid between the two. If she relaxed she knew she would go sinking, sinking into a bottomless void. Something was happening to her but she did not know what it was, her senses refused to make her mind aware.

The dark figure beside her moved, was reaching into his pocket. His hand brushed her leg and it was as if she had been touched by a high voltage wire. But she was paralyzed, could not move.

No one spoke. A match was struck, her head turned mechanically, saw the cigarette, the smooth olive skin of Chico in the glow of the match. The cigarette glowed for an instant, then was passed to the redhead in front, then came back to the boy on her right.

"Take a drag, baby." They were the first words spoken. The stupor

would not clear from her mind. Automatically she took a puff while the blonde one held it for her.

But it wasn't tobacco and she turned her head away, choking and gasping.

One of them laughed. "Take a smaller puff and hold it down."

She tried to do as she was told but the smoke made her retch.

"Hell, she ain't used to it. She'll get sick."

"We ain't hardly touched the gin," the redhead in front said. "Maybe she wants a drink. You want a drink?"

She managed to shake her head no.

"Take a slug," Chico commanded. "It'll do you good."

She started to protest but he shoved the bottle at her. She took it meekly and put it to her lips.

"Hey, you gotta take the cork out first! What's the matter, you dopey or something?"

He pulled the cork for her and she felt the gin sear her throat. It made a hot round ball of fire in her stomach that seemed to stay there, burning like a live hot coal.

"Take another. It'll relax ya. You're all tensed up."

Again she did as she was told. No one spoke. The cigarette went slowly around. They lit another. It seemed to her the silence was building, like a balloon growing, growing, until it must finally burst. The stars, the moonlit night, the dark trees around them were mo-

tionless, suspended in time while the balloon grew bigger and bigger.

"Ya got a swell figure, baby."

It was Chico whispering, his mouth close to her ear. She felt his hand on her body and it was as if every nerve had been touched but she could not move. She tried to scream but it came out a giggle. She forced herself to stop. If she started she knew she wouldn't be able to control it, the balloon would grow bigger and bigger until it exploded.

"Come on," he whispered, "let's get outa the car."

She was powerless. She felt the eyes of the other two as Chico dragged her stumbling a few feet away. He pulled her unresisting down into the soft grass. She felt his mouth on her neck, his hands exploring, the tautness of his hard young body against her own.

His hands were jerking, fumbling with her clothes and suddenly she knew what he intended to do. She screamed and the sound galvanized her enregy. She struggled violently against him as his hands held her, dug her nails into his face as hard as she could.

"Charlie, goddamnit, get out here and help me hold her!"

The car door slammed. Another pair of hands found her. She was sobbing now, writhing, fighting with all her strength to get away. Suddenly Chico's arm went back and he smashed her in the face with all his weight.

The shock was blinding. The strength went from her arms and legs. She knew instinctively she was badly hurt. She felt her clothing being torn. Half conscious, she saw the young face of Chico over her, felt his body on her and she knew then the long dark night would never end.

"Can I be next, Chico?" she heard Charlie ask huskily.

"Naw, you lunkhead. Dave's next. You're last."

"How many cars you got up there now?" the Sheriff said.

"Three. Thirty-two, twenty-four and eleven. They've each got an area."

The Sheriff stalked up and down like a caged bear. He had come back from taking Priscilla home. "What did Jim get from that roommate?" he demanded.

"Nothing much. Got her out of bed. Mary Anson didn't come home. When she works late, she gets in about quarter to one. She's twenty, came out from Nebraska three, four months ago. Five three, weighs around one ten. Blonde hair, blue eyes. The roommate says she's pretty."

The Sheriff grunted. He thought: Prissy's sixteen and her mother and I don't know half the time what she's doing. He said, "How about boyfriends?"

"She dates one or two, but the roommate only knew their first names."

"Well, it wouldn't be one of them. She wouldn't scream if it was somebody she knew."

"What makes you so sure they took her into the hills?"

"Goddamnit, there ain't no place else to go! If they was on 101 or in town we'd have heard."

"They could be parked on any of a hundred residential streets."

"With a girl screamin' and raisin' hell? We'd have had a thousand calls. And that's why they didn't take her to no motel, neither."

He stopped and looked bleakly at the deputy. "I don't like it, Wes," he said heavily. "They got a gun. Suppose them young punks are hopped up or something." He rubbed his hand through his thinning brown hair. "Get another report from the cars up there."

"They just checked in five minutes ago," the Deputy said.

"All right, all right. Never mind." He walked over to the big county map on the wall, stood staring at it for a minute. "I'm goin' up there," he announced finally. "You notify the other cars. I'll start working from Hackett Road south."

"Right," the Deputy answered.

"And get your necktie buttoned up. You want the people of this county to think they got bums workin' for 'em. You ain't no lawyer yet." He jammed on his big white straw hat and stomped out the door.

The Deputy gazed after him. "Get your necktie buttoned up."

How the hell, he wondered, can you button up a necktie? It was hot and after midnight and nobody'd be coming in. And the Sheriff himself always looked like he'd slept in his suit.

But he understood what was eating the Sheriff, knew how he worried about Priscilla. She was a nice kid. Yet this Mary Anson was probably a nice kid, too.

Nevertheless, he buttoned his collar and drew up his necktie before he called Thirty-two.

"Whadcha have to do that for?"

"She was makin' me sick with her moaning and groaning."

"You silly, stupid bastard! She's dead. I never should have given you the weed in the first place. You got nuts, completely nuts!"

"What we gonna do with her?"

Chico looked around him in the warm moonlight. They were alone up here, nobody in miles. A nice night. It seemed to him he'd never thought more clearly. His thoughts proceeded ahead in clear, logical order. That's what the weed did for you, let you think clearly. He knew already every step the cops would take. He was so much smarter he didn't really have to worry. Still, it was better to play it safe.

"Nobody knows she's been with us," said Dave. "All we have to do is keep our mouths shut."

"That's right," said Chico. "There's nothing to connect us

with her. All we do is keep our mouths shut. Can you keep your mouth shut, you redheaded slob?" He didn't remember having the gun but now he saw he was waving it at Charlie.

"Sure, I can keep quiet, you know me, Chico. We gonna leave her here?"

"We put her in the car and there's bloodstains or something like that. Don't be dumb. We leave her here. She ain't found for a week or so. Ain't nothin' in the world to connect us with her."

"You ain't got another stick, have you, Chico? I'm sorta nervous and all."

Chico smiled. That dumb Charlie, like a big, woolly dog. He said, "I got a couple left. But we'll smoke 'em later. Let's get outa here now. That girl scratched the hell outa my face and arms."

"No red convertible," Hank Sherman said as he turned the patrol car back onto the highway. "No red convertible, no three kids, no girl."

"There's another dirt road about half a mile," Mike Griswald said, settling back in his seat. "We'll try that."

"You know 'em all, boy."

"I ought to. I used to come up here necking before I got married. Three kids don't leave much time for that any more."

"The old man's worked up, getting up here himself. Or is it just

too hot to sleep and he'd as soon ride around?"

"It don't sound good if they forced her into the car."

"No, but how does he figure they'd come up here? There's three other directions they could go."

"I dunno," Mike said, looking out the window. "He's got a feel about things. I seen him outguess people before."

"Oh, well," Hank said, "I was tired sitting around Merced substation on my tail anyhow." He guided the patrol car expertly around the curves, the headlights sweeping the road shoulders. The wind whipped through the opened windows and insects smashed themselves against the windshield. They passed another car going in the opposite direction, but it was not red and it was not a convertible.

"Slow down," said Mike. "It's along here someplace."

Five hundred feet ahead the tail lights of a car pulled out fast on the highway, gunned off ahead of the patrol car. Mike sat up in the seat. Hank hesitated a moment, then pushed down hard on the accelerator. Neither said anything. The other car was beyond the beam of their headlights, impossible to tell anything about it.

Before the car ahead had picked up speed, the patrol car narrowed the distance between them. "All right," Mike said coldly, "that's the one." Hank reached down and turned on the red flasher. They

could see the three occupants of the convertible twist around, turn white faces at them.

"They're going to run," Mike said in a carefully controlled voice. The car in front shot ahead fast. He reached for the mike, pressed the switch, said, "Twenty-four. Red convertible going south Highway Five, four miles north of Brent Road. 'We're after it.' He added, 'There's no girl.'"

The road was good but winding. Hank opened the siren, took the curves with tires squealing. Abruptly one of the figures in the red convertible turned. They could see the gun. There came a flash, a whine, another flash.

"Oh, Lordy, Lory," Mike whispered. "They're shootin'." A little reluctantly he reached for the short barreled rifle held in clamps on top of the dash. He leaned from the window, his head laying on one arm. He waited until they came to a straight stretch and the patrol car had stopped swaying. He squeezed the trigger fast three times.

The red convertible veered suddenly, started to skid. The high rear end whipped twice almost across the highway. Suddenly it jerked clear around, leaped high, began to roll. Two of the occupants started to be thrown, were caught under the car's first roll. The other disappeared in the roar and dust and crash of twisting metal as the car rolled, bounced, hit a tree.

Hank fought to avoid the bodies on the pavement as he swerved and skidded the patrol car to a stop. For just a moment Mike sat stock-still in the shuddering car, his face white. Slowly he put the rifle back into the clamps on the dash and reached for a flashlight.

He walked forward to the wreckage while Hank went back to the two in the road. They came back to the patrol car.

"Better notify the Sheriff," Mike said quietly. "I'll put flares down."

Sheriff Cannon stood looking into the red convertible, smashed and twisted on its side against a tree. His straw hat was shoved back on his head. The body in the car was crushed down between the seat and the steering post. Young, he thought, not a boy, not a man. Or—part boy, part man. He said, "You say they fired first—" and

stopped. He saw something, reached in under the body and brought out a broken, half flattened cigarette. He sniffed it and his face hardened. He dropped it in his shirt pocket.

He felt suddenly very old and tired. "Goddamn them," he swore. "Goddamn them and their cheap kicks." he didn't want to think about Mary Anson, whoever she was. And he didn't want to think about Prissy, asleep in bed now, her smooth cheek against the pillow, her dark hair spread out. He turned away, the lights from the patrol car flashing red, red, red, reminding him of something, something deep in the recesses of his mind, that he could not bring to the surface. His face took on a gray, ghostly look. He knew they'd have to go back, down that dark road, and he knew with a certain horror what they'd find.



THE GIRL FRIEND

BY
DAVID
DWYER



*He was hunted and lonely, desperately cold and tired.
Then the girl came. She knew what to do about everything.*

THE heavy sky was sodden with fog and rain. It lay among the mountains and low over the twisting river and blanketed the streets and alleys of the small town. Lights became glimmering splotches of red in the dusk, as if the dark underbelly of the sky had been stabbed and was bleeding drops of glowing blood from a hundred wounds.

A man, walking slowly, stopped and peered at the arrow pointing upward toward the top of the stairs. The words beneath were still vaguely discernible. *HOTEL AS-*

TOR. RATES BY DAY OR WEEK. STEAM HEAT.

"Some name for a dump," he muttered. "Why don't they call it Hotel Dump. They give fancy names to places so they can charge more. Dirty thieves. Every place you go it's the same." He felt the hard weight of the Luger under his arm and the dampness of the sky under his coat. He shivered. A door opened and suddenly there was the blare of a juke and a woman cackled. The door slammed and the sounds were cut off as if a switch

had been clicked. A form moved past him and was gone, leaving behind a sour odor of stale wine.

He shifted the paper-wrapped bundle under his left arm, turned and resignedly climbed the long flight of stairs. He reached the landing, stopped and looked through the framed glass door. The glass was streaked with greasy dampness and beyond he saw the small empty lobby, the closed doors, the table piled with worn magazines, two or three cane chairs with sagging seats, an old roll top desk against a wall.

He opened the door and stood inside feeling the rush of warmth and smelling, sick with hunger, the odor of fried meat. He waited, looking around at the emptiness, listening to muffled voices, forks clinking against plates. He crossed the lobby to a chair and wearily sat down, holding the bundle against his coat front with both hands. He moved his arm to feel the bulge of the Luger. The room slowly melted and then dissolved into an emulsion of sleep.

He jerked his head upward, suddenly knowing that a door had opened and closed and that a figure was standing over him, watching. He saw it through the thick mist; the hump rising behind the crooked neck, a face creased with age, milky eyes filled with distrust peering down at him.

The man tried to shake his brain awake in little jerks as if it were a

defective watch. He waited for the ticking to start.

"You can't stay here without the slip. Not unless you got a dollar. The rooms are a dollar. In advance," the hunchback added.

The man sat forward on the chair, feeling the bundle under his hands. "I got to get some sleep," he said. "I got to lay down some place for awhile."

"You can't sleep here in the lobby. We don't allow that. We have our other guests to think about. If you ain't got the money you go down and get a slip from Sally and we'll fix you up. We have nice clean beds in every room."

"A slip—?"

"From Sally—the Salvation Army. You tell them you ain't got a place to sleep and they'll give you a slip so you can stay here one night. The slips are like money. I turn them in every month and they pay me off." The hunchback belched and plucked at a tuft of hair in his ear.

"I don't want to do that," the man said, fighting for wakefulness. "To ask for something. I'm not a tramp. I don't have to ask for things."

"You been on the road awhile. Sometime's a man's got to ask for something. They come in here everyday and they been sleeping in box cars, under bridges or maybe jungled up down by the river. Hungry too. There's two kinds, and I seen enough to know which is

which. There's them that just want a warm place to lay down and sleep. And there's the ones who come in here mean and mad. They're mean on account they're hungry and cold. I was born in this town 72 years ago and I seen plenty come and go in my time."

"I got money—"

Somewhere behind a door a man coughed; a beginning cough, wet, drawn, filling lungs with sharp edges and throat with spasms of sucked-in breath. The cough died and there was the sound of a clock and water splashing in a sink.

"I got a nice room for two dollars, water in it and a private closet to hang things in. Plenty a room for company too." The hunchback winked.

"Just a bed. A place to lay down and sleep." *You want my last dollar to take to the graveyard. You old toad. I ought to put a bullet through you.*

"You come over here and put your name on the book. Checking out time is eleven o'clock." The hunchback turned toward the desk. "We got to get the room ready for the next guest."

Holding the bundle under his arm, the man stood up, took a wadded bill out of his pocket and tossed it on the desk. He picked up the pencil, hesitated, signed and turned to watch the hunchback smooth and peer at the dollar. He quickly tucked it into a shirt pocket and then scratched his chest over

the pocket as a door opened and closed.

"You didn't turn the light on over the sign," said the girl. "I could see from the window you didn't. It's dark and nobody can see the sign. Maybe you don't want anybody to see it."

"Where you going dressed up like that?" The old man dropped his hand and faced her.

"Out," she replied. The chair creaked as she sat down, crossed her legs and lit a cigarette. She was about mid-twenty, with dark hair, arched brows and cupid lips. Large heart-shaped rhinestone earrings dangled on each side of the round face. It was a petulant, little girl's face grown wise and its voice was incongruously husky. She turned to examine the stranger. He had a thin young face poised over a slender body hunched in a damp brown topcoat. The shoes and cuffs were wet and splattered with mud. A button dangled by a thread from his coat. His features seemed overshadowed by fear, exhaustion, defiance and hate. Her eyes blinked their approval.

"You can't go out like that every night," the old man said.

"Maybe you want to bet that buck in your pocket."

"Sally sent him over—"

"She didn't either," protested the guest. "I paid cash. I don't have to ask anybody for anything."

"Don't mind him," said the girl, tapping a cigarette with her finger.

"He's a senile liar. He's been lying all his life and now it's getting worse."

"You can't talk to me like that Elfreda. Not in front of people. I can go in there and pick up that phone and make you sorry. I can have you sent back."

"Go on, I wish you would."

"Jail. That's where I can have you put."

"And then who would you paw around on? Go on, call the cops."

Married! They're married. The thin-faced man moved his eyes from the girl to the hunchback.

"I been good to you. I've treated you like a—"

"Don't say daughter," she interrupted.

"And you make a fool of me. You go down the street and make a fool of me in the town I lived in all my life. Look at you sitting there all painted up like that. You're just a tramp, Elfreda. I should have let you stay there and rot."

"You want to tell this guy all about it, huh?"

"I'm not going to let you make a fool of me like this in front of everybody. Like you been doing. I'll kill you first. You never seen what happens to somebody when they been shot by a twelve gauge. They don't look human any more."

"That's no way to talk," said the guest. "Threatening a girl like that. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Thanks mister," she said, jig-

gling her foot impatiently. "But don't talk to him about shame. He don't know the meaning of the word."

"She's a chippy—a pushover," said the hunchback. "A pushover for any guy that's got the price of a beer."

"He don't need the price of a beer if I like him," said Elfreda. She raised her eyes and looked at the stranger.

"How about my room? I'm dead for sleep."

"Did you have supper?"

"It doesn't matter," he replied, smiling vaguely at her.

"C'mon, your room's down the hall," said the hunchback, turning to lead the way. He pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and said, "Elfreda, you sit right there 'til I come back."

After the door was closed the man stood for a moment in the center of the small room and looked around. He was breathing rapidly as if he had run up a flight of stairs. The bed occupied a corner and opposite it, against a wall, stood a rickety bureau with cracked mirror and top etched and stained by cigarette burns and spilled liquids. Partly obscured by a faded curtain, several wire coat hangers hung from a rod nailed across the corner.

The man laid the bundle on the bureau and picked up the single wooden chair and quickly and silently wedged its back under the doorknob. He switched off the light

and then in darkness crossed the room, felt for the bed covers and folded them down. He put the bundle and the Luger under the covers, where he could touch them as he slept. He raised the blind and stood in front of the window peering downward at the mist-filled darkly lighted street. A man with hands in pockets passed a shop window on the opposite side of the street and a car, top glistening, moved slowly past. He turned away from the window, undressed and sat on the edge of the thin mattress. Shivering violently, he found his way under the covers.

It was later, how much later he could not know, when in a mist of sleep he heard a persistent scratching. It sounded like tiny claws. The scratching seemed to gradually get louder as if the tiny claws were in his skull, painfully picking chunks of sleep from his brain. Suddenly he sat bolt upright in bed and was staring at the darkened wall. He fumbled for the Luger, found it, threw back the covers and tiptoed to the door. He pressed an ear against the door and heard the pounding of his heart, then the single whispered syllable of his own name. He pulled the chair from under the knob and slowly opened the door. A moment later the girl was standing beside him. He closed the door and again wedged it shut.

"How did you—?"

"Shhh—" She clutched his arm. "We got to whisper. They can hear

through the transom."

He sat down on the edge of the bed. She sat beside him and in the darkness handed him a paper sack. "It's a burger and fries," she said. "I didn't know if you wanted mustard or relish, so I told them to put both." Her whispers were barely audible above the rustle of paper and sounds of hurried eating. He could feel the warmth of her breath against his ear. "I got your name out of the book. It ain't your real name, is it?"

He shook his head and grunted.

"Your real name is in the papers. There's a picture of you, too. Everybody's talking about it."

He paused and said, "you shoulda stayed away."

"I couldn't do that."

He swallowed a mouth full of food and said, "I hid all night down on the river bank. And then this morning about daybreak some duck hunter came along. He seen me and I had to shoot him."

"They found him. That's why they know you're here, somewhere."

"It was the same with that guy in the bank. People keep asking to get themselves killed."

"I been listening to the talk."

"Yeah?"

"It ain't the reward they want, it's that pile of money you got."

"The dirty thieves. They can go rob their own banks."

"They talk about what they're going to do with all that money, if

they get to you first."

"First? First before what?" He crammed the last of the hamburger into his mouth.

"The cops."

"They must want to be dead."

She squeezed his arm and felt the coldness. "Maybe we can get away."

"How come you didn't turn me in?"

"I hate them."

"What about the old man?"

"He's in bed. But he'll know about it first thing in the morning. He'll hear talk and see the papers. And then he'll know who you are."

"I woulda stayed down by the river except I was freezing. And I knew they would come looking for that guy I shot. I kept thinking about a place to lay down and sleep. I kept thinking about a bed, or maybe buying a used car. But I couldn't spend any of the money because it's in big bills and people would be watching for them. And all I had of my own was a dollar."

"You could stay here."

"But you said—" He turned to look at the oval paleness of her face in the darkness.

"I could hide you."

"They would take this dump apart—board by board."

"Not if they didn't know you were here."

"The old man would tell."

"He couldn't tell—if he was dead." She felt his arm tense under her hand.

"They'd wonder where he was."

"Sometimes he goes away," said the girl. "He goes down to Barras County to visit his sister. I have to do all the work then, and take care of the guests. You could stay in the office, and nobody would know." Her voice was pleading. "You could eat and sleep all you want."

"But what about the—?"

"We could put him in this room, in the bed. It's cold in here. He would be the name you signed on the book. And then, later, we can go away—together."

"I been thinking about Mexico."

"We have to do it now," she whispered. "It'll be light pretty soon and people will start moving around. The cops too. They'll come up and ask about you. I hate him," she added. "He can't keep his dirty hands away from me. I couldn't go away because I was released to him on parole. I do the maid work and cooking and he can't keep his hands away. He oughta be dead."

"You won't have to do that kind of stuff in Mexico. We'll have plenty of money. You can take it easy."

"We have to do it now," she repeated, glancing at the window.

He stood up and searched for his trousers.

A dim night light cast the office into shadows and in a corner the hunchback lay huddled under the blankets of his cot. The shotgun, double barrels vaguely gleaming, stood upright within easy reach. He moved restlessly, raised his

head and peered at the closed darkened door. "Elfreda, is that you?" The old man's voice was thick with sleep.

"I see you standing there, Elfreda. Answer me." He propped himself on his elbow. The two earrings reflected tiny pinpoints of flickering light and her perfume seemed to fill the small room.

"You been drinking, Elfreda. You know what the parole officer says about that. I can tell—"

"You ain't saying nothing pop. Not to nobody." The old man jerked his body around and looked upward at the thin face above him. He felt hands on his neck and hard thumbs crushing his windpipe.

"Kill him," said Elfreda. "Kill him."

She watched the two bodies on the floor squirming, kicking, cursing, grunting in a tangle of blankets, and then she felt a surge of panic. The hunchback was on top, lips drawn in sardonic smile, flailing silently downward at the form under him. His blows ceased gradually and he was held suspended by the two upthrust arms with hands clinched against his throat.

Elfreda knelt beside the forms and peered into the hunchback's face. She saw the frozen smile, the opened unmoving eyes. "You can let loose now", she said.

The young man toppled his victim aside, untangled himself from the blankets and crawled to the cot. Gasping painfully, he rested his

arms and head on the side of the small bed. The girl knelt and put an arm around his shoulders. "It's all over now," she murmured. "Everything will be all right."

Still breathing hard, he faced her and said, "The old guy was—strong. I thought—for a minute—I'd have to—shoot him."

"It's all right now," she reassured him, gently squeezing his shoulder.

"I got to get him down the hall—to that room." He rose and stood looking down at the body. "But I don't think I got strength—to pick him up."

"I can help—"

"No, I'll have to drag him. If anybody sees us, you—"

"What'll I do—?" Her voice quavered with fearful uncertainty.

"Here—" He reached across the cot and picked up the shotgun, clicked off the safety, and handed it to her. "If anybody sees us, use this. We got nothing to lose."

She looked down at the weapon, feeling the coldness in its awful weight. "How do I—?"

"Just point it and pull the trigger."

"Like this?"

"Yeah, but be care—"

She was deafened by the explosion and the shotgun kicked itself out of her hands. She crossed the room, picked up the phone and dialed. Presently she heard the sleepy voice of the desk sergeant.

"I want to talk to somebody," said Elfreda, "about that reward—."

It's the Law

Collected by Floyd Hurl

In Nebraska

you can be fined \$25 to \$100 if your clock does not show standard time.

In Whitesville, Delaware

it is against the law for a woman to propose marriage during a leap year.

In Georgia

a man may have his marriage declared "no contest" if the girl vamped him by "artificial means," rouge, false hair, etc.

In Wheaton, Illinois

there's a law that forbids anyone to enter the courthouse with their shoes on.

In Maine

there is a law that permits spinsters to get pensions, the pensions to be paid for by an annual tax on bachelors over 30. Bachelors may avoid the tax by proposing marriage to three women once or to one woman thrice.

In New Jersey

there is no law against peeping toms so long as they are neither drunk nor use foul language. However . . .

In Indianapolis, Indiana

a man was arrested and charged with being a peeping tom. The culprit, righteously indignant, protested, "I ain't that sort! I was just waiting for the old lady to go to bed so's I could steal her car!"

JOE MARCATO was stumped. He paced the floor of the small office; he bit off the end of a cigar, then threw the cigar away; finally, he walked over to Sol Arnold's desk, and shook a paper under his nose.

"Do you know what this is?" he demanded.

Falls, Bureau of Detectives. These three were the Bureau. Local jokesters sometimes referred to them as the "three blind mice." Joe was Chief of Detectives.

"Do you realize," Joe bellowed at both men, "that, for a small town, we have some of the best crime detection equipment in the

WRONG VICTIM

Ike Baker confessed the murder of his wife. That seemed simple enough . . . except Ike's wife had not been murdered.

BY
W. DELOS

"Sure, Joe," said Sol, placatingly. "That's Ike Baker's confession. I was here when he signed it."

Joe turned and pounced on Len Douglas, the third man in the room. "And do you know what he confesses?" Joe asked.

"I was here too, chief. He says he murdered his wife. She's up in the hospital morgue right now."

The black lettering on the door of the office said: South Baltimore

whole damn state?"

"Sure, Joe."

"And the facilities of the states Criminal Bureau at our disposal?"

"Sure, Joe."

"Then why can't we wrap this case up?"

"Could it be," asked Sol, "because the coroner's report states that the woman's death was due to natural causes?"

"So this—whats his name—."

"Ike Baker," said Len.

"Yeah, him. What's his angle? Why does he call us yesterday, and say he murdered his wife? Why does he sign a confession saying he strangled her? Is he nuts?"

"Sure," said Len, "he's a nut."

"Chief," said Sol, "why don't we go over the facts, such as they are, and see what we come up with?"

"Great," said Joe. "The only fact we have is that the Baker woman died of cancer—with no outside help, as far as an autopsy can determine."

"Check," said Len. "The coroner's report says death due to lymphosarcoma. Coroner also notes there is a scar on her neck of recent origin. He further notes this was probably the excision of lymph nodule for biopsy. Time of death—early Tuesday morning."

"But," Sol broke in, "Baker called us Tuesday afternoon, six or eight hours later. What'd he do all that time?"

"A good question," said Joe.

"He's just a nut," Len exploded. "Why don't we have him examined by a head doctor, and certified, or committed, or whatever it is that they do?"

"What about Baker's confession?" asked Sol. "We can't just ignore it."

"Let's see how the psychiatrist explains it," said Len.

"What do you think, Chief," asked Sol.

"Len's probably right, but while

we're getting Baker's head examined, why don't you do some checking? Talk to his neighbors, employer, tradespeople, see if you can get some background on him. I'll take Doc Gertmann out to see Baker. I'll find out how he spent his time yesterday, too. Len, you stick by the office, and we'll keep in touch."

The hot August afternoon had turned sticky when Joe returned to the office. The air had that breathless feel that precedes a thunderstorm.

"Sol back yet," he asked Len.

"Out in his 'lab'," said Len, nodding toward an adjoining room.

"Sol," Joe shouted, "come on in here a minute." Then, turning back to Len he asked, "Anything new here?"

"Not much. Andy Case, the coroner, called. He said no doctor in town did the biopsy on Mrs. Baker. Thought we'd like to know."

"That's interesting," said Joe, "but I don't know what it proves."

Sol came hurrying in. "Hi, chief. What's Doc Gertmann's verdict?" he asked eagerly.

"Sit down, Sol," said Joe. "You know about Len's report from Andy Case?"

"Yeah. For a while I thought I had a lead that tied in with it, but I drew a blank."

"I guess I just about drew a blank, too," admitted the Chief. "I took Gertmann out to Baker's place. We didn't let on to Baker

who he was. I told Baker we weren't quite clear on his confession, so we went all over it again. We quizzed him for nearly two hours, to give Gertmann a chance to observe him."

"And—?" asked Len.

"Well, Gertmann said it's difficult to draw any positive conclusions from such a limited observation, but he says Baker has a very suspicious and excitable disposition."

"That's all?" asked Len.

"He also said," Joe continued, "that Baker must have hated his wife. She may have been cheating, as he says in his confession."

"Or the other way around?" asked Len.

"Yes, it's possible that he wanted out of the marriage and she was giving him a bad time. Or it's possible, the Doc also pointed out, that there's some money angle we don't know about. At any rate, he apparently had a subconscious, or even a conscious desire to kill her. Her death from disease frustrated that desire. Now his subconscious is satisfying that death wish by telling him he killed her."

"You see," said Len, "I told you he's a nut."

"But," Joe added, "Doc Gertmann also pointed out that Baker has decided paranoiac tendencies and would be quite capable of murdering his wife."

"Well," said Sol, "I'm just about convinced there's more to this than just some mental hocus pocus."

"You've found out something, then?" asked Joe.

"I started with Baker's employer."

"He said he works in a junk yard," added Len.

"Yeah. Triangle Salvage. There are only two employees, besides Herb Anson, who owns the place. Herb says Baker was a good worker if left alone. He did his job and Herb left him alone. The other employee mostly drove a truck, and had little contact with Baker."

"Baker give any references when he took the job?" asked Joe.

"Herb advertised in the 'Help Wanted.' Baker came in and said he could do the job. Its not complicated. He operates a metal shear and a hydraulic press. He gets \$80 for a forty hour week. He claims two dependents, himself and his wife. That's all Anson could tell me."

"How long's Baker worked there?" Joe asked.

"Since last February. About six months."

"Where'd he come from?" asked Joe.

"He never said. Herb never asked," said Sol. "So then I went out to check with his neighbors."

"No neighbors," growled Joe. "Except that gas station down the road a ways. Too bad Baker didn't live half a mile farther out. The county sheriff could be doing the honors instead of us."

"That's the old Greene home-

stead, the Bakers are living on," said Sol. "It used to be a big farm. The family never sold off any of the land, so no houses got built around there."

"How'd Baker get it?" asked Joe.

"He rented it through a broker. The place is real run down. He rented cheap."

"That all?" asked Joe.

"I also found out no milk man, insurance man, or anybody else goes to the house."

"That guy is Mr. Anonymous of 1960," said Joe.

"Baker pays his insurance at the office," continued Sol. "Its cheaper. There's a \$500 policy on his wife; \$1500 on himself. He had six tons of coal delivered Tuesday. Didn't want to lose the summer discount. The electric meter is on the outside of the house. The meter man has never been inside."

"How about that guy," said Len. "His wife just died and he worries about a six dollar discount on coal. He's really a nut."

"How about the gas station?" asked Joe. "Anybody there ever notice Baker or his wife around the house?"

"I dug some pay dirt there, chief," said Sol. "The guys at the gas station never noticed any activity around Bakers place. But Baker buys his gas there. He drives a beat up 1954 sedan. He had it serviced last Friday afternoon. I took a look at the car."

"Where?" asked Joe.

"In the barn, where he keeps it. While you and Doc Gertmann were keeping him occupied, I cut across lots and looked over his outbuildings. The car was in the barn."

"That's illegal," said Len.

"I didn't know what I was looking for, so I didn't want to alert Baker. You know that little sticker they put on the door frame when they service a car?"

"Keep going," said Joe.

"They put one on Baker's car when they serviced it Friday. They marked the mileage—56,240. Baker's speedometer reads 56,358 right now."

"How does that figure?" asked Joe.

"Look," explained Sol, "Baker worked a half day Saturday. He went to work again Monday. Yesterday and today, he didn't go in. A round trip between his house and the Triangle Salvage yard is just over six miles. I clocked it. Two trips—twelve miles. But he put 118 miles on his car since Friday afternoon."

"A difference," said Len, figuring, "of 106 miles."

"Any idea where?" asked Joe.

"I thought I had, but it didn't check out. I drew a circle with a fifty mile radius on the map. Lincoln falls on the circle."

"There's the Hope Memorial Hospital at Lincoln," said Len. "Exclusively for cancer treatment."

"I checked with them," said Sol. "No record of a Margaret Baker."

"That all?" asked Joe.

"One more thing," said Sol. "I was able to lift some fingerprints off Baker's car. Three different sets."

"Whose," asked Joe.

"Don't know yet. One set was only on the door handles on the right side. The other two sets are on both doors and the steering wheel. Some of those must be Baker's."

"How about the guy in the gas station?" asked Len. "He'd leave prints on the steering wheel."

"That's an idea," said Joe. "We can check that. The other prints, just on the one door, are probably Baker's wife's."

"Thing is, Chief," said Sol, "none of these prints belong to the woman we've got in the morgue!"

"What?" said Len.

"No fingerprints on Baker's car match our customer's," Sol repeated patiently.

"How do you figure it, Sol?" Joe asked.

"You ever hear the story about the guy that called a doctor in the middle of the night? 'Come quick Doc,' he says, 'my wife's got appendicitis.' 'Impossible,' says the Doc, 'I took her appendix out two years ago. I never heard of anyone having another appendix.' The man says, 'Now, Doc, you get right on over here. You ever hear of anybody having another wife?'"

"Sol, I think you've hit it," snapped Joe, jumping to his feet.

"Len, call in the prowler car. Ride up to Baker's with them, and bring Baker in. Don't arrest him unless you have to. Just bring him here. C'mon, Sol, we've got work to do."

Fifteen minutes later, Baker came in, accompanied by Detective Len Douglas and a uniformed policeman.

"Sit down, Baker," said Joe in his friendly tone. "It's about that confession of yours. It's giving us a lot of trouble, you know."

"I don't see why, Mr. Marcato. I killed her. I admit it, so why don't you arrest me?"

"Why'd you kill her?" asked Joe, sharply.

Baker sat forward stiffly. "She had to be punished," he said, looking at Joe sideways over his nose. He spoke rapidly, almost unintelligibly. "For her wickedness. She thought I didn't know, but I knew. Drinking, and men, and all manner of vileness. She was clever. I never caught her, but I knew. The devil's . . ."

"Why'd you call us?" Joe broke in on his raving. "Why not let it go as a natural death. It looked that way to us."

"It was an execution," mumbled Baker. "An execution must be public, as a warning to others. It had to be made known. Her wickedness . . ."

"Where is she now," snapped Joe.

A change came over Baker. He leaned back. His hands relaxed.

His eyes half closed. "Why, she's at the morgue. You took her there. Isn't that where you took her?"

"Len, lock him up," said Joe. "Get the shovels, Sol. Baker, we're going out to your place. How long do you think it will take us to move six tons of coal?"

Baker's head dropped. After a long pause he said softly, "All right, she's there. I strangled her and put her in the coal bin. They dumped the coal on her without knowing it."

"And the other woman?"

"Her sister, poor soul. She was the good one. We brought her

home from Lincoln last Saturday. From the hospital. There was nothing more they could do for her. When she died, there was nothing to keep me from punishing the other one."

"Punishing her for what?" asked Joe.

"For the evil ways, for her uncleanness . . ."

Joe motioned to the policeman in uniform. "Take him out and book him for the murder of his wife. We've already got his signed confession."

"Just like I told you," said Len. "He's a nut."



YOUR
COMMUNITY

...is a better place
to live and work
because
you gave
the United Way



TASTE OF TERROR

He'd lived all his life with the foul, fetid taste of fear, in the sickening mire of his own cowardice. And now the moment had come for his act of expiation.

BY

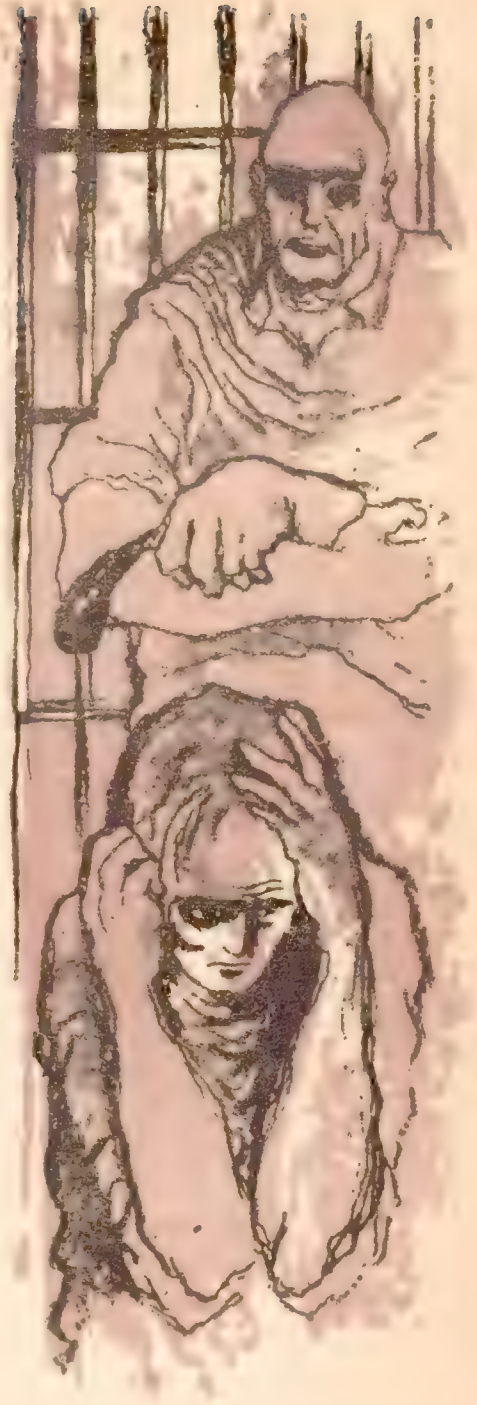
PAUL

FAIRMAN

THE ROOM was a symbol of poised savagery, each of its parts fitting into the overall pattern. The ceiling, a harsh white; the walls empty except for blood smears put there by accident or design; the table strewn carelessly with objects covered over by a dirty white cloth; objects hidden, but bulking up to be seen for what they were.

Instruments of torture.

The man strapped in the big wooden chair was stripped to the waist and the heat in the room



brought sweat to run down in little rivulets and soak his trousers.

Slim, blonde, in his late twenties, he had been born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, a place far from the Central European prison into which disastrous fortune had brought him; a city thousands of miles away in distance; hundreds of years in terms of abuse and torture.

There was a uniformed guard in the room; a squat, scowling underling with a .45 automatic in his belt. He would also be the torturer when the three interrogators returned and he could scarcely wait for the pleasure in store because he was that kind of a man. They had searched carefully in order to insure his being that kind of a man.

In what was probably nervous reflex, the guard came close, seized the strapped man by the hair and twisted his head around cruelly. His look of hatred and contempt was entirely genuine as he looked down into Wayne's face. And there was something else also—a quivering eagerness to translate those emotions into action.

My name is William Wayne. I am a tourist. My papers are in order . . . My name is William Wayne. I am a tourist. My papers are in order. . . .

It went through his mind again and again, that declaration; all he was supposed to tell them. Along with that which would be their answer:

You lie. You are not a tourist and your papers are forgeries. You are an American Intelligence agent and you made contacts before we arrested you. You contacted traitors here in our country and we want their names and addresses.

Over and over—the statement and the reply—while fear and terror boiled inside him—while he sat there cringing even before the instruments were uncovered; cringing and knowing they would get their answers because he could not stand even the thought of torture now that he faced it.

Because he was a coward.

Weak, close to exhaustion, his mind sought relief through a retreat into memory, but the certainty of cowardice would not be blotted out. There was nothing in his mind behind which it could hide. But explanation, justification, was perhaps possible, and he went back twenty years; back to the day it had been so clearly and sympathetically explained to him.

Omaha. Long ago. A summer afternoon.

Perhaps a dozen kids there in the park when the trouble came. He'd always managed to avoid trouble before; dodge it skillfully and keep people from knowing.

But this time a lad in the gang decreed otherwise. A pugnacious little red-head named—Good Lord! He'd even forgotten the boy's name!—But there'd been no way out of the show-down as the lad

came at him with flailing fists.

And with escape cut off, he cringed and whimpered in the face of the violence; went to his knees; covered his head with his arms and moaned out complete surrender until the red-headed boy turned away in disgust.

Then the disgust and contempt became a swirling cloud around him; formed into a nightmare complete with the chant that stayed with him down the years: *Billy Wayne's a cow-ard! Billy Wayne's a cow-ard! Billy Wayne's a cow-ard!*

With even a few adults looking on with distaste.

Until the gang tired of it and went away, leaving him forever branded. Leaving him alone.

No, not quite alone. As he sat there, his fists clenched on futility, his eyes closed, he became aware of a heavy fragrance. Aromatic pipe tobacco. And then the question:

"Pretty bad, old chap?"

A question so quietly asked, with such genuine sympathy behind it, that his answer came automatically before he had time to freeze it.

"I get sick. My stomach. I get sick at my stomach. It's not that I'm afraid. My knees go soft. I shake all over."

"I know. We call it physical fear for want of a better name. Many people have it."

He opened his eyes. The man was sitting beside him smoking a big briar pipe and looking thoughtfully off across the park.

"It's no different, really, than a withered arm or a physical sickness. It's just that people look at it differently." He drew on the pipe and watched the smoke cloud vanish. "People are wrong, of course. People usually are. They don't revile a man for having tuberculosis or malaria. But let him show any sign of physical fear and—" The man tapped out his pipe and regarded it critically.

"You mean—I'm not the only one?"

"Good heavens, no! Some of the greatest heroes we ever had were physically fearful. The *real* heroes, lad."

This was confusing. "Cowards are heroes? I don't—"

"Look at it this way. Let's say we have a battlefield here and one of our enlistees is clearly at the other end of the scale. His stomach stays as solid as a rock. His knees are iron posts."

The man scanned the park like a military strategist. He pointed his pipe. "Now, just out there is a nasty machine gun nest. It's holding us up. So our lad with the steel stomach grabs a chopper and has a go at it—right across the open field because that's the only way. If he doesn't get there, he's just another dead soldier. But if he does, he may be in for a little bewilderment. He may wonder what the medal and all the back-slapping are for."

"He'd deserve them. He'd be a hero."

"Oh, certainly. He'd deserve recognition all right. But here's another lad. He was born with a curse we know as physical fear. His stomach heaves and his knees wobble and his skin crawls but he goes after the nest. The point I'm making is that the second lad walking the same route as the first is wading through living hell every step. So if he makes it and comes back—there's a real hero."

Billy Wayne thought that over. The man looked down at him. "The measure of any act, lad, is the difficulty of its accomplishment."

"I guess you're right."

"And one more thing. The man with the withered arm learns to compensate. He lifts with the other. A man afflicted with physical fear faces it squarely for what it is and—"

"—And crawls in the dirt," Bill said miserably.

"Let's say instead that he learns. You have a lot of years ahead, lad. You're learning."

The man got to his feet. He looked down at the boy with compassion. "He fights his affliction. He studies it. He grows up."

This seemed a gloomy prospect to the beaten boy.

"And in the end, lad, a man can find a way if he has courage."

"A coward—have courage?"

"There's no connection, lad. Some of the bravest men I ever knew were rank physical cowards . . ."

The man left. Billy Wayne never saw him again; never knew his name, but he stayed in the boy's memory. In a sense, he shaped Billy's life. Billy remembered him every time he thought of the inconsistency of the path he took. Into the Army; fooling them all the way; qualifying for dangerous work with no one having the least idea of how ill-equipped he was.

But always the big question: Why? Does a man who fears water swim the Channel? Does a man who dreads heights become a stunt flier?

Does a man with rank physical cowardice take the path to possible torture?

It seemed insane, yet here he was and not because he'd tried to prove the unprovable. No more so than a man tries to cure heart disease by climbing a mountain. It had been psychological, rather. The fascination of what one fears. Those who fear heights often go as close to the ledge as possible, drawn by the foundation of their own terror. People who fear snakes have been known to stand for hours watching the creatures in a zoo.

So Billy Wayne had moved, fascinated, into the realm of his own terror, using as a prod, the self-assurance that he could outwit them. He would never be caught. His intelligence would compensate because he knew that *he did not dare get caught*. It was as simple as that.

But here he was, with the guard like a dog on a chain—eager to apply the whip and the pincers and the knife; with the three interrogators entering the room, throwing the cover off the torture tools and speaking among themselves in whispers.

And within him, not one whit reduced by the years of battle, the rationalizations, the assurances, was the terror. The flesh in panic, refusing all obligations except that of self-preservation. Patriotism, loyalty, integrity—only words. Frederick Kroener, Jan Mankowsky, Menner, Fleischmann, Deletier—only the names of men who would have to find their own safety. There was nothing he could do for them. He could not keep their secrets because with all the years between, he was still a child cringing and whimpering in the park under the fists of a red-headed boy.

And while he sat there, sick also from the image of himself, the other sickness was greater. And he knew the first kiss of the leaded whip, the first grip of the sharp pincers on a fingernail, would bring names and secrets pouring out.

He was a coward. This fact and this fact alone, had bridged the years.

No. Not this fact alone. Something else was there—struggling inside him. A way? Perhaps. That far-off voice: *A man compensates. A man afflicted with physical fear, see it for what it is, and—*

A man finds a way . . .

He saw the possibility as the guard bent down to grin into his face. Narrow and doubtful, but a chance.

And he took it. He raised his head and formed his own look of contempt. He said, "You pig! You filthy, rotten, swine!"

And he spat squarely in the guard's face.

The following few seconds were strange ones indeed, his mind suddenly clear and sharp, alert for reaction.

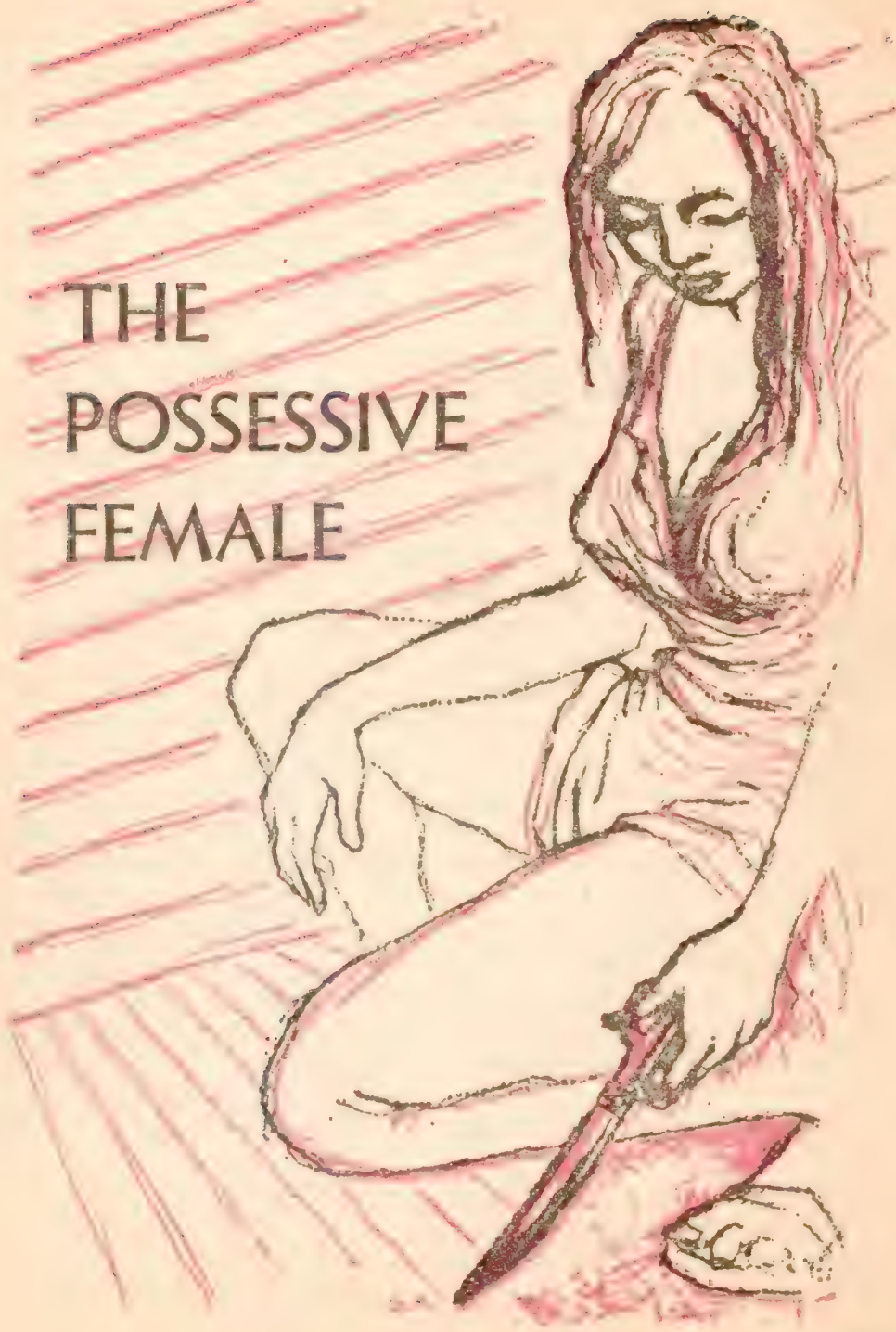
And reaction came swiftly. Quick, blind, rage flared up and spewed out of the guard. His right hand went without thought to the pistol butt, jerked the gun horizontal, and as William Wayne looked down the black barrel he saw victory there. In this sudden grappling of two weaknesses, that of the guard was the greater.

William Wayne saw as in montage, the horror at the torture table; the three interrogators frozen in that split second of pressure on the trigger of the .45. One hand went up in protest. One voice screamed the beginning of an order.

But too late. Their prize was lost to them.

And in the end, the gods were kind. They stretched the exploding microsecond—even while the fire-flash blinded him—into a long moment for William Wayne. A moment, a pinnacle of joy greater than he'd ever known.

THE POSSESSIVE FEMALE



She stooped down, her blouse opening and her coppery thighs bulging below the tight shorts, and pulled the scissors from her husband's throat. "My only pair," she said.

BY CHARLES RUNYON

I DREAMED the bloodhounds had me flat on my back, licking my face. I fought my way out of sleep. Marie was kissing me.

"You love me, Paul?" she whispered fiercely. "Do you?"

She captured my hands and shoved them under her blouse, mashing them against her bare breasts.

"Tell me, dudu," she demanded. "Do you love me?"

I'd heard the question thirty times in the three days I'd been holed up at Sapphire Estate. But now a static of fear had broken through her singing Creole accent.

I snapped awake and looked toward the window. Black night outside. Black wall of jungle thirty yards away. Mammoth fireflies strung flares among cocoa trees, bananas and breadfruit. I saw the rest in my mind; the high misty spine of this strange West Indian island on one side, a pitted asphalt track sloping to the Caribbean on the other side.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"My husband return from Vieux Fort."

I jerked back my hands as though her breasts had turned to red hot stove lids. "Where is he?"

"In the west wing."

I relaxed a couple of nerves. She'd given me a room in the east end of the sprawling plantation house. I could play Tiger Rag on a steam calliope without being heard in the west wing.

"Does he know I'm here?" I asked aloud.

"No." She paused, then her short, high giggle came out of the darkness. "Greg knows nothing."

"Damn." I sat up and fumbled an Anchor Special out of the pack on the nightstand. She struck a match and fired the end of the cigaret.

The matchlight gave her high-cheekboned face the color of antique gold. She wore an embroidered low-necked blouse from Martinique. Her hair, pulled over her left shoulder in Creole style, was a

shiny black rope lying between the high swell of her breasts. Her body exuded the citric odor of Limacol skin freshener, mixed with the perfume of sundried clothing and the exciting smell of woman.

"Nothing changes, Paul," she said with childish emphasis. "I own Sapphire. I keep you by me."

I half-smiled as I fumbled for my clothes. Life was so damn simple for these women. Matter over mind. "Kid, you can't leave out your husband."

"No man rule me, Paul. I keep you by me."

Her tone was that of a rebellious adolescent. She wasn't much over twenty; talk would get us nowhere.

I found the Bermuda shorts and jerked them on. Greg's shorts. A sleazy way to treat an old buddy I'd worked the arctic oilfields with. Even though I hadn't seen him for five years. He shouldn't have married a babe young enough to be his daughter. The tropic sun must have boiled his brains, otherwise he'd never go off to load bananas and leave a young wife in the bush with the itch on her, willing to be scratched by the first joker who came by.

Too bad the joker had to be a flat broke fugitive who couldn't go another mile.

I fumbled under the bed for my shoes. "Let's have some light, kid."

Her bare feet whispered on the straw mat. She lit a kerosene lamp and set it on the nightstand.

"You vex with me, Paul?"

I looked up. She stood with her feet apart, hips forward. Coppery thighs bulged out below her burnt-orange shorts. Amazon-type woman. A hybrid beauty whose blood held a contribution from every race which had passed through the islands.

"No," I said. "The party's over, that's all."

"You fear Greg?" She stepped in front of me and shoved her fists against her sides. "You a big big man. He told me you bash four men in Aclavik when they try to rob him. You bash him too."

The thought of bashing old Greg would've made me laugh another time. I shook my head and slid my feet into my shoes. She dropped to her knees and began tying them. I leaned back and let her; she seemed to get a charge out of waiting on me.

I eyed my image in a gilt-edged mirror on the wall. Sleep-matted blond hair above a heavy-boned face. Marie's food had filled out most of the hollows I'd acquired on the hard run up from Venezuela.

Okay buddy, I thought. You're supposed to be one of the smartest oil geologists in the business. Why must you learn everything else the hard way?

The last seven days had been crammed with educational experiences. First lesson: Never pick up a well-dressed woman who winks at you in a Caracas nightclub. Most

likely her husband has just gone to the john. Second lesson: Don't try to explain to an angry Venezuelan. Kill him if you can; run like hell if you can't.

I hadn't run until he was dead and I'd learned that his family swung a heavy political axe. Then I'd bugged out like a scorpion-bit dog, leaving Royal Dutch minus one rockhound, and myself minus toothbrush, passport and money. Now I had to beg sanctuary from a man whose wife had slept with me for three days.

I noticed the criss-cross of scratches on my shoulder. "I need a shirt, tiger-girl."

She padded out and came back with a short-sleeved white shirt. She slid it onto my arms and came around in front to button it.

"*Coutay, dudu*. I treat you good, *way?*"

"An impartial observer would say so."

"And you would not say?" She put her hands on my shoulders and looked down at me. "You come to me dirty and hungry. I cook your food with my own hands because my servants are busy with bananas. You seem lonely so I give you talk of myself and my family which hold this land for two hundred years. When sleep come in your eyes I take you to bed. When you wake and stretch out your arms for a woman, I am there. So now I am nothing?"

I grinned up at her. The appeal

had touched me the first time I'd heard it. "Yes. You're Greg's wife."

She brought her face so close we almost touched noses. "Already I am yours more times than with Greg in two years."

"You kept score?" I got up and smacked her rump where it swelled out below the too-short shorts. "Mark that down as the last, then, and take me to Greg."

She gave me a sullen look and picked up the lamp. I followed her swinging hips through the high-ceilinged rooms and commended myself for not telling her about Caracas. The way she was acting, she might have used it for a bit of amorous blackmail.

I was surprised to find that I wasn't too broken up about the end of our fun and games. A girl like Marie was *Bó Dieu's* gift to a lusty man on a rainy night, but after three days you stopped feeling like a man and began to feel like a tool.

She stopped at a door and swung to face me. "In there, Paul."

I took the lamp and saw that her eyes were dark pools of worry.

"Relax, kid. We won't fight." I smiled as I pushed open the door.

Then I nearly dropped the lamp.

He lay face down on a straw mat beside a bar of split bamboo. He wore the planter's usual white shorts and shirt, with socks clinging to thin, hairy calves. His toes turned out like Charlie Chaplin's but it wasn't a damn bit funny. I'd seen enough dead men to know

that Greg had joined the club.

I ran forward and rolled him over. It was like being kicked in the guts by a pack mule. A pair of sewing scissors had been stuck in his throat.

Marie's voice trembled across the room. "Paul, he . . . he trip on the mat."

I turned. She looked like she was scared sick of me.

I just felt sick. "What was he doing with the scissors?"

"He chase me, say he split my face. He very very drunk."

I looked back at Greg. The face I'd known through two years of arctic nights had changed. The gray hair had left his narrow skull. Deep lines curved around a once-whimsical mouth. In the last five years he'd turned the sharp corner that leads to old age.

"Drunk?" I pushed the word past an aching lump. My lips felt swollen. "Doesn't sound like Greg."

She padded across the mat and squatted beside me. "You don't see him for long time, Paul. When banana boat come in, he go to Cloud's Nest and drink with tourists. He play like rich planter and make love to *blanc* women."

"The hell he did." I remembered Greg in our camp on MacKenzie Bay, smoking his pipe and setting up the cribbage board while the others went out to look for women. Now he was supposed to be a red-hot papa with a letch for Iowa

schoolteacher types.

Huh-uh. I didn't buy it. I folded the mat over his body and stood up. "Will you go?" I asked. "Or do I?"

Her chin jerked up. "Go?"

"After the police."

She stood up, wetting her lips with a pink tongue. "You want . . . *police?*"

"Do I want—dammit, Greg's a white man. You can't just dump him in a ravine. You have to get a death certificate."

She pressed her palms to my chest. "I think . . . the police must not know." Her fingers played in the hair on my chest. "I think of you, Paul, and why you come to Sapphire."

I felt a sinking of my stomach. "I came to visit Greg."

She smiled. "You forget I have eyes, *dudu*. When you come, your suit look as if you sleep in somebody's engine room. I find salt water marks upon it. I know you stow away, then swim ashore to keep away from immigration man. I listen to Radio Guardian from Trinidad. I hear of a big man in Caracas who stick a knife in the back of another."

"His *back?*" I exploded. "That's a damn lie. It was in his chest. The same knife he pulled on me."

"Ah?" She raised her dark eyebrows. "You explain this when the police return you Caracas. Then the Venezuelans kiss you on both cheeks, eh?"

I felt a sick, helpless frustration.

A fugitive is worse off than a baby kitten. You don't even have to drown him; just drop a word in the right place. And Marie knew the word.

I untangled Marie's fingers from my chest. Looking down at Greg, I felt the old instinct of survival slide into gear. I didn't love myself for it, but there it was.

"Did anyone know he came home?" I asked.

"No." She smiled and brushed her cheek with a swatch of black hair. "Only you, Paul."

You couldn't mistake that smile. *Possession*. I felt walls closing in. "How about the servants?"

"I gave them holiday. They hold *fête* in Soufriere."

"Fête?"

"Drink dance, all night."

"What'll you tell 'em?"

"I say he run away. They believe."

Yeah, they would. She was something to run from.

"We'll have to get rid of him," I said.

She nodded. "We take him up the *morne*, to *Bouche Nwa*."

"What?"

"Smell."

I threw back my head and drew a cubic foot of air through my nostrils. At first there was only the perfume of cocoa. Then I caught the rotten egg stink of hydrogen sulfide. Oilfield work had desensitized my nose to the smell which thickened the air.

"What have you got, a private volcano?"

She nodded. "It is *Bouche Nwa*, the black mouth. Black water boil and bubble from the belly of the *morne*. In two minutes the flesh will be gone. In an hour nothing remain."

Ugh. She talked like we were boiling a chicken. "How far?"

"Twenty minutes. Thirty if you carry Greg."

Cold fingers did a riff on my spine. How the hell did she know how long it took to carry a corpse up the mountain? The deal had the rotten smell of murder. So blasted neat—private crematorium . . . servants boozing it up in the village . . . the only witness a man who couldn't blow the whistle . . .

Suddenly I wanted to look around without having her hot breath on my neck. "Fix me something to eat, then we'll go."

"You like some parrotfish?"

My stomach lurched. "Anything. kid. Anything."

After she left I folded back the straw mat and looked at Greg's wound. It was nearly two inches wide, which meant the scissors had been open when they pierced the skin. They were closed now. She'd seen him fall, then ran back and snipped the jugular vein, or . . .

I lifted his head. A man stabbed in the throat bleeds like a hog. The brown stain on the mat was no bigger than a tortilla. I knew he hadn't died in this room.

I picked up the trail from a pin-head-sized drop near a side door. The blood spoor led me through a library and a sewing room, then petered out in a room with a huge, canopied bed. I peeled back the crisp sheets and saw the dark glistening blotch on the mattress.

My fists knotted. Greg had bled his life away in bed. I started for the dining room in a white, killing rage.

Then I stopped. A question trembled in my mind. If she'd worked so hard to hide a murder, why lead me to the corpse?

Answer: She *wanted* me involved.

Question: Had she killed him to get her hooks into me?

No answer. I had to find her motive.

You could've parked a Vauxhall on her dining room table. As usual, she'd laid it with etched crystal, bone china and heavy silver. As usual the food was straight West Indian: boiled breadfruit fried in coconut fat, parrotfish in orange sauce, fried plantain crusted with brown sugar, and French coffee loaded with chicory.

She sat across the table and watched me shove a few bites past my tonsils. I felt like a new pet rabbit munching a lettuce leaf.

It wasn't hard to get her talking about Greg. I think she figured she had me in a box with the lid nailed down, and didn't care what I knew. She said Greg had tried to raise

nutmegs on a small acreage he'd rented from her. He'd gone broke learning that the climate was too wet for nutmegs. So she gave him a job managing Sapphire—helping her first husband.

I nearly swallowed a fishbone. Two husbands, at her age?

The first was a kid who'd jumped the cable ship from England. Had straw-colored hair (like mine, she said) and pink skin so tender she had to keep him out of the hot sun. He hadn't liked Sapphire. The strange magic of white women had kept pulling him to Vieux Fort, and the Cloud's Nest. Just like Greg, she said. And one rum-sodden night he died.

"How?" I asked. It was torture to sit, quietly smoking.

"He fall into ravine and break open his head."

"So you went to Greg—"

"And I cry cry cry—"

"And he dumped the body for you."

She blinked her wide, dark eyes at me. "Yes."

My fists knotted on the tabletop. I felt rage swirl inside me, building up pressure like steam in a closed boiler. "So you murdered them both."

"Paul . . ."

"A neat system. The second husband carries off the first, and so on. Keep the premises clean. Don't be a litterbug."

"Dudu . . ." She got up and came around the table. "Do not

think of the others."

"Get away."

She laid her palm on my shoulder. "I wish only to keep you—"

Her touch blew the safety valve. I swung around and slammed her in the belly with my forearm. She sprawled on the floor with her legs flung wide.

"Bitch!" I yelled. "You killed him in his sleep!"

Her face looked like curdled coffee cream. She tried to gasp my name. "Pau . . . Pau . . ."

I took a step toward her, then stopped. I was afraid I'd kill her. "I'm going after the police," I croaked.

Her eyes flew wide and she found her voice. "They ship you back to Caracas!"

"Goodbye." I turned and took two steps.

"Paul!"

I swung around. She was standing up with her fingers hooked in the low neck of her blouse. Her lips pulled back from her teeth. "Watch!"

She jerked her hands apart. The blouse shrieked down the center. Her breasts shook as she shrugged it off her shoulders. She bent and seized the bottom of her shorts. She pulled upward, rending them at the seams.

Then she straightened and wriggled her hips. The shorts slid to the floor. She stood like a naked golden statue, her sweat gleaming in the lamplight.

"What now, Paul?" she asked softly.

"I've seen this feature. Goodbye."

"You don't understand. I do this for policeman, not you."

I felt a tight band closing around my chest. "Go on."

"You kill one man in Caracas. Why not another here?"

"Another?"

"Greg."

I licked my lips. They felt like sundried leather. "I see. I then went after you and tore your clothes off."

"If I say it, they believe me."

Several things curdled inside me at the same time: Her cold, almost offhand method of murder, the way she'd come to my bed before he was even cold, her design to use me the way she'd used Greg . . .

I walked toward her on legs stiff as tree trunks.

"You blackmailing, murdering, *bitch!*"

My hand cracked against her jaw. She reeled against a gold-leafed liquor cabinet. Bottles crashed and the sweet smell of rum filled the room.

"Bitch!" I jerked her away and slammed her against the wall. For a second she seemed to freeze there, a four-limbed shape, tawny in the lamplight, with hair billowing out like black smoke.

I hit her again. She took three long, sprawling steps, then made a clumsy swan dive onto the table. A small fortune in crystal and bone china crashed to the floor.

Rage left me all at once. I felt like a used rocket casing; hot, smoking, and empty.

Panting, I regarded the golden body spread out on the polished mahogany. Her shoulders trembled. Then they shook. The shaking mounted to a convulsed heaving. Her mouth flew open and a shrieking laugh burst into the room. I looked at the window, half-expecting to see it shatter into a thousand fragments.

"Oh, Paul! You bash me and break my bones, but you never, never leave me!"

The hairs on my neck prickled. Her hips rocked and her laughter whooped out again. It stuck hot fingers into my brain and twisted it like taffy candy.

"Get up." I panted hoarsely. "Get up!"

She shut it off like a faucet. She rolled onto her back and looked at me. Her eyes were half-closed. Blood smeared her mouth like a clown's makeup. Her breasts and belly were streaked with orange sauce.

"Get up," I said again. "There'll be no more beating."

"*Fini?*" she asked, like a disappointed kid. "Come to me, Paul. *Vini piti-piti.*"

Oh God, I thought. She liked the beating.

A thought wriggled into my mind like a bright, venomous snake: *You'll have to kill her, Paul.*

I pushed the thought away. It

sidled up to me again and spoke from the corner of its mouth. *On the morne, Paul. Two boiled chickens in the black water are as easy as one. It's you or her.*

Okay. I had to do something. I had to do it before I lost the stomach for it. I grabbed her wrist and jerked her off the table.

"Get a blanket to wrap Greg's body in," I told her. "Can you find the place at night?"

She looked up through her veil of hair. "Of course."

"Of course." I thought of her two husbands. "I figured you could."

She draped herself in a gray tent of a dress like those the Negro women wear in the fields. Then she helped me tie Greg in the blanket. It was like a man and his wife wrapping a gift on Christmas Eve—until she pulled the scissors from his throat.

"My only pair," she explained.

I felt a sharp shooting pain in my throat.

I shouldered Greg like a sack of feed and struggled behind her up the narrow trail. The black jungle smelled like a mouldy grave. The fireflies had retired for the night, but the frogs had taken their places, big as buff orpingtons.

She held a flashlight pointed backward, lighting the path for my feet. Once she shot her beam into a pair of dull red eyes. "Manicou," she said, and I walked past a possum-like animal which seemed

paralyzed by the light.

A few minutes later she stopped to let a horde of brown shapes squeak across the path ahead of us. "Wood rats," she said as they crashed into the jungle like a pack of dogs. The trip was a wierd nightmare. Greg gained weight with every step and my shirt got soggy on my back.

We'd run into four other paths when it struck me that I'd have to get back alone. I started engraving the landmarks on my mind: a tall breadfruit . . . a pile of coconut husks . . . a clump of bamboo. A few times I managed to break off a banana leaf and drop it into the path behind me.

We rested once in a clearing set with three black-shingled shacks. They were deserted, since the occupants had gone to the shindig in the village. Marie led me to a tiny garden and picked up a bottle with three white feathers stuck into its neck.

"Obeah charm," she said. "It protect the garden."

I grunted, too out-of-breath to talk. She threw down the bottle and said peevishly: "You mus' learn black men's superstitions, *dudu*, if you rule Sapphire for me."

It hadn't taken her long to fit me into the household.

Later we were almost overtaken by a group of laughing men and women. I hid behind a banana tree while she spoke to them in machine-gun patois. After they'd gone

on, their excited babble drifted back to me.

"What'd you say to stir 'em up?" I asked.

"I ask only if they enjoy the fête." She laughed. "They think I make Obeah when I walk the *morne* at night. They have great respect for me."

On and up. Barbs of pain raked my legs and Greg felt like a cement mixer on my back. My legs felt like wet spaghetti when we finally stepped out into the moonlight.

"There is *Bouche Nwa*," she said with an owner's pride.

I thought of a medieval woodcut of hell where fleshless hands groped from the blasted earth.

Dead mahoganies lifted their leprous arms around a black bowl two hundred yards across. It humped up in the center like a festering, smoking sore. The stink of sulphur could have been sliced with a knife.

I left Greg slide to the ground and stretched my arms. They popped like a string of baby firecrackers. I sat down on the warm rock and started rubbing the kinks out of my legs.

"I will do that," she said.

She knelt astride my legs and her hard hands went to work untying my knotted muscles. Her hair brushed my thighs and sent electric tingles to my groin.

"You still vex at me?" she asked.

I tightened my jaw and said nothing. I couldn't let her soften me up.

"Paul," she went on, "*Bô Dieu* make me as a joke. He give me this body which burn for love. Then he cover it with skin that is not white and not black. You understand?"

She lifted her face. Moonlight gleamed white on her cheekbones, leaving her eye sockets in total blackness. She had a strange, wierd beauty, like the jungle.

"No," I said.

"I cannot love black man. And white man cannot love me. You see?"

What I saw was the old myopia of the islands, of people who can't see past color. Marie was stuck in the limbo of the mixed blood. She couldn't climb up the ladder and she wouldn't climb down.

"Did you give your husbands a chance?"

"Yes!" She pushed her face into mine. "I love them like fire, but they lie cold in my arms like dead fish. My ears ache for the soft words but they never speak them. They save them for the tourist women, the *blanc*."

"Your fault, Marie. You black-mailed them."

"No!" She spat out the words. "*Blanc* women! They show their white legs and my men crawl."

Her savage, clawing hatred made my skin itch. "How do you know I won't?"

Her face changed suddenly, without transition. She smiled. "You are not like the others, *dudu*. You bruise me with love."

She leaned back and squeezed my thighs, like a boxer squeezing a rubber ball. "Besides, you cannot go to the *blanc* women. They would prick you with questions, 'Why you come this small island? What you do in the States?' Ah, they would find you out, *dudu*."

I smiled tightly. "If they didn't, you'd turn me in. Right?"

Her hands stopped squeezing a second, then went on. "You be safe at Sapphire."

"Sure I would. Some night I'd stagger home with a belly full of rum and lipstick on my shirt—"

"No!"

"—and I'd wake up with those damn scissors in my throat."

She looked up at me and whispered. "If you believe so, then kill me."

I grabbed the thick rope of her hair and jerked her head into my lap. I twisted the hair around her throat and choked off the beginning of a scream.

The rest should have been easy. I had her arms pinned against her body. The garrote was firmly in place. All I had to do was apply the pressure—

And I couldn't do it. I ground my teeth and felt the sweat dripping off my nose, but my arms wouldn't move. That one accidental killing in Caracas had led me to overestimate my own villainy. I couldn't kill a woman.

I relaxed my grip. Her hair sprang out around her neck like a

black scarf.

"Get up," I grunted.

She pushed herself to her knees and massaged her throat. Her voice was husky. "I knew you couldn't do it."

"You think you could've stopped me?"

She nodded. "With one word. Listen."

I held my breath. The hills rumbled. "*Drums?*"

She nodded. "My people all return now. They watch the paths with cutlasses sharp like razors. I tell them maybe a killer is loose at Sapphire."

I wanted to pound my head against the trunk of a mahogany tree. Of all the stupid, sentimental fools . . .

"You lying bitch. That's what you told those people."

"Not until after I see you pull banana leaf. Then I know what pass through your mind." She smiled. "Now you cannot leave without me, *dudu*."

I pictured fifty black men crouching in the bush, fingering their long, curved knives, their brains afire with rum. A chill climbed my back. What if I *had* killed her?

For a second I felt a hopeless fatigue. She kept weaving new strands in her web, wrapping me in her cocoon. I couldn't kill her, couldn't leave without jumping into the Caracas frying pan . . .

Suddenly I knew what I had to do. I got up, shouldered Greg's body,

and walked to the edge of the blasted bowl.

"Wait, Paul!"

She ran up beside me, grabbed a dead stick and flung it out on what looked like solid rock. Ten seconds later it flared like a torch.

She swung to face me. "Your eyes do not tell what is safe for your feet. You must follow me exactly."

She hiked up her dress and stepped out on the scab of hardened lava, walking on the toes of her sandals. I followed, feeling the heat bite through my shoes. Red cracks glowed in the rock on either side. It occurred to me that she was a lousy test for a two-hundred pound man with a 150-pound corpse on his shoulders. I kept expecting to crash through like a horse through thin ice.

Halfway up the central hump she stopped. "Take care, Paul. The edge is not safe."

I felt reckless and go-to-hell, like a guy who stomps the gas when his wife yells to slow down. I shouldered her aside and walked to the top of the hump. Dropping to my knees, I humped my back and dumped my bundle on the lip of the crater.

I wriggled forward and peeked into the crater. Upswirling gusts of hot vapor nearly choked me. Black water hissed and bubbled ten feet below. Black pistules swelled and burst into dirty geysers.

I crabwalked back to Marie.

"Take over, kid."

She looked at me, her face tight with fear.

"Go on! You want him to rot there?"

She crawled up to Greg. Rising to her knees, she rolled him once. He balanced on the edge for a second, then disappeared.

Marie stood up. Her dress ballooned up around her thighs and her hair streamed out like a black flag. She stepped forward and peered over the edge.

Sure, the witch had to inspect her cauldron. I'd counted on it. I inched up the slope and crouched behind her, bouncing on the balls of my feet. *Now . . .*

I dropped to my stomach and wrapped my hands around her ankles. Gauging her distance from the crater's edge, I jerked backwards. She screamed in terror as she fell, striking the edge of the crater halfway between knee and hip.

Holding tight to her ankles, I counted off five seconds. "*Marie, shall we talk?*"

She clawed backwards for a grip on the crater's edge, but her hands only broke off chunks of cindery rock. She wriggled her legs, trying to pull herself back, but I held them tight.

"Marie! I won't kill you, but my hands may slip!"

Her legs stopped moving. Her voice rose above the hiss and crackle inside the crater. "*What you*

want?"

"Words! So your men will let me off Sapphire!"

I gave her a couple of seconds, then let her slip an inch nearer the edge.

"Yes! Yes! I give you that!"

"In writing."

Silence. The written word packed a monstrous wallop in this land of symbolic magic. People burned their toenail clippings and never gave their right name to a stranger. A word on paper was a pact with the supernatural.

I let her slip five more inches. Since her knees couldn't bend forward, it brought all her weight and half of mine to bear on the crater's edge. The breccia couldn't take it. The ledge crumbled.

Suddenly my head and shoulders hung over the cauldron. Marie dropped, almost pulling my shoulders from their sockets. She swung from my hands like a chicken over a steampot. Her dress had fallen over her head, exposing her to the armpits.

I pulled her up. Wet hair fringed her moisture-beaded face. She'd fainted. I carried her to the base of the hump and laid her down. The rock was only warm here, and you could breathe the air without chewing it first.

She woke up coughing. Her body shook like an oil rig in a hurricane. "I . . . write it Paul," she gasped. "When we return to Sapphire."

"Now." I ripped off my shirt, not bothering with buttons. I found a charred stick near the crater, and she wrote on the shirt, using my chest for a backstop. There were four sentences in Creole patois. I asked her to translate.

"I write that you are now . . . master of Sapphire. My people will do as you say."

"Master—?" Well, that was a damn sight more than I'd asked for. I wondered if she'd misunderstood me in the crater.

But it still wouldn't keep those scissors out of my throat. I ripped the shirt apart, shoved the written half in my pocket, and laid the other half in her palm.

"Now write me a confession."

She looked at the rag as if it were a dead mouse. "Confession?"

"That you murdered your first two husbands."

She gave me a wide-eyed look. "Why you want this, Paul?"

"Protection. We'll have us a Mexican standoff. Neither can hurt the other."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"You hold a killing over my head. I hold these over you."

She started shaking her head.

"We can always go back up to the crater," I said.

Quickly she spread the shirt across my chest. I held my breath and hoped the pounding of my heart wouldn't louse up her penmanship.

She raised the charred stick, then stopped. "Paul, will you remain at Sapphire?"

"Write."

She lowered her head and the stick moved.

"In English," I said.

She stopped. "You mus' give me the words."

"Write, 'I, the undersigned, confess that I murdered—' What was your first husband's name?"

"John Beckett."

"—that I murdered John Beckett and Gregory Randall.' Then sign your name."

She lip-spelled the words as she wrote. When she finished, she gave me the cloth. Her face had a forlorn look. "If you go, Paul, I have nobody by me."

"Too bad you're so hard on husbands," I said, reading the note. She'd written what I told her. I shoved it in my pocket, hoping the confession would never have to be tested in a courtroom. I planned to send it away, to be opened only if I died at Sapphire.

"Now let's get off this slag heap," I said.

"Kiss me first."

I looked at her in surprise. Her eyes were closed, her lips lay soft against her teeth. Impatience crawled over me like little red ants.

"Are you, for God's sake, going to lead me off or not?"

"Not unless you kiss me."

I whirled away from her and walked across the smoking slag.

"Paul, come back!"

I stepped over a dull red crack and kept going.

"Paul, *you go off the pa—!*"

Her shout snapped off in a piercing scream.

I turned. At first I thought she'd fallen when she ran after me. I saw only the upper half of her body.

Then the steam boiled up around her. Her arms clawed the rock and I knew she'd broken through.

I ran back and grabbed her wrists. She made a thin mewling sound as I pulled her from the hole. I tried to pick her up, but she screamed and arched her back when I touched her legs. They felt hot and slick.

I got my hands under her arms and carried her high, legs dangling. I laid her at the base of the hump with her legs pointing up the slope. Shock position. It was all I could do. She needed water, plasma and medicine, but I couldn't get off the crater.

After a few minutes she stopped moaning. "Take . . . off my shoes. They hurt."

I looked at her feet, then away. Her shoes had burned off, along with most of the skin of her feet. I looked at her face and saw the bright fear in her eyes.

"Is it . . . bad?" she asked.

I worked it out in my head. Third degree burns over a third of the body equal death. Her legs were parboiled almost to her hips.

I brushed the hair back from her cold wet forehead. "No," I lied. "Not too bad."

"Hold me."

I pulled her head into my lap.

"I . . . feel better," she said. "Can you carry me to Sapphire?"

"In a minute," I said. I listened to her quick, shallow breathing. Her eyes were a dull glaze, her face the color of ashes.

Sure she felt better. She was going into deep shock. I pressed my hand to her breast. Her heartbeat was a weak flutter. She didn't have many more minutes.

Her lips moved and I bent to hear.

"Will you . . . stay with me at Sapphire?"

"Yes."

"True? You want to?"

"Yes."

She closed her eyes. "I believe you, *Dudu. Ba mwe un ti bo.*"

I didn't know the words but the meaning came through. I bent and touched her lips. They moved once and were still.

When dawn came I carried her body off the crater.

A half-dozen men waited under the mahoganies with cutlasses in their fists. When I showed them the words she'd written, they stuck their cutlasses in their belts and wanted to carry her for me. But I held her tight against my chest, her black rope of hair flowing over my arm. In the gray daylight, her bloodless face was almost white.



EVERYONE in Hesterton knew that Wilber Minetree was dying. In a town of five thousand souls a thing like that gets around.

It was the main topic of conversation at the post office, one of the early morning meeting spots of the downtown business set.

The nature of Wilber's illness was analyzed, the fact that this one and that one had seen Wilber only a few weeks ago "looking the picture of health" was noted with a shocked clicking of tongues and shaking of heads.

Then it was unanimously agreed that Wilber had been a fine, up-

standing citizen during his tenure of life, that he had promptly discharged his debts, paid his taxes, voted the straight Republican ticket, made a success of his job, and belonged to the Elks lodge.

"Of course he owed it all to Hortensia."

This statement was also seconded and accepted with no dissenting vote.

"Why, I knew Wilber back in grade school," one of the main-street business men offered. "He was tardy every day of the year. Never got to a class on time in his life."

IN MEMORIAM

BY
CHARLES BOECKMAN

She'd been the perfect wife. She'd made him what he was. And now, on the eve of his death, when everything had been arranged . . . it really seemed a shame.

This little human flaw in Wilber's character was agreed upon fondly by other friends of the now almost deceased.

"Fact is," the spokesman ventured further, "I guess if he hadn't married Hortensia, Wilber would have turned out to have been a bum."

Now this was going a bit too far. Even though it was probably true, it showed remarkable lack of tact. There was a disapproving clearing of throats, shifting of feet, and a few dark looks.

Mort Fowler, owner of the Serve-U grocery store, who had made the faux pas looked embarrassed and drew back into the crowd.

There was a moment of silence. Then one of Wilber's colleagues at the Farmer's First National Bank said, "Well, you do have to give Hortensia credit, though. She's been the making of Wilber Mine-tree."

There was a general agreement to this observation.

The fact was that most of them had known Wilber since childhood and they knew that Mort Fowler had been right. Without Hortensia, Wilber would indeed have turned out to be a bum. Though, it was in pretty bad taste to point this out with the poor man on his death bed.

Before Wilber got married he'd never been anywhere on time in his life. He blissfully overslept

every morning, was fired off innumerable jobs. Alarm clocks were totally ineffectual with Wilber. At the time he met Hortensia, he had been reduced to racking up pool balls at the Downtown Recreation Hall and Dominoe Parlor.

It was a matter of record that a startling metamorphosis had taken place in Wilber after his marriage. Fortunately, Hortensia was a strong willed woman, a fifth grade school teacher who was a few years Wilber's senior. She had a matronly bosom, a slightly brassy voice, and the hint of a mustache. But she was just what Wilber needed. She spoke to Alex Craine, president of the Farmer's First National Bank about a job for Wilber. It was in keeping with her nature that she would want her husband to have a position of dignity in the community. Needless to say, working for the Farmer's First National Bank carried more status than racking up pool balls.

It was with considerable trepidation that Alex Craine put Wilber on at the bank. Please don't misunderstand. Alex did not dislike Wilber. Nobody in Hesterton actually disliked Wilber. He was one of those happy-go-lucky, affable slobs whom everyone liked. It's just that you didn't want him working in your place of business.

But Hortensia was extremely persuasive and to escape the frontal assault of her personality, Alex had agreed to give Wilber a job in the

bookkeeping department at ninety dollars a month on a trial basis. He felt justified in lowering the bank's personnel standards in this manner on the grounds that he'd probably be able to fire Wilber after the first week with a clear conscience.

He was extremely surprised to find Wilber reporting for work the next morning precisely on the stroke of eight. "Shocked" would perhaps be a more exact description of his reaction. To the best of his knowledge it was the first time in Wilber's life that he had ever appeared anywhere on time. Not only that, but Wilber's shoes were shined, his suit pressed, and his shirt starched. "Good morning, Mr. Craine," Wilber smiled affably.

This was the start of a satisfactory relationship between Wilber Minetree and the Farmer's First National Bank that continued for thirty years. And not once during that period of service—let us repeat—not once, was Wilber Minetree ever tardy, nor did he miss a single day of work. There were times, it is true, when bets were laid among the employees of the bank with rather startling odds. The time Wilber dragged himself down more dead than alive with influenza, and the morning after the Elks Christmas dance when Wilber had been more lit up than the thirty foot Christmas tree down on the square.

But he always greeted Alex Craine on the bank steps at eight

A.M., with his "Good morning, Mr. Craine," even though somewhat weakly on the two occasions mentioned above.

Of course, no one knew, but everyone guessed what struggles, cajoling, threats, and tears Hortensia Minetree went through in order to keep Wilber punctual. There was some rumor as to the use of force, but this was probably malicious gossip.

It was, however, public knowledge that all the clocks in the Minetree home were set a half hour ahead, that a strident and somewhat brassy voice was often heard in the early mornings issuing from the Minetree house and carrying the length of the block, and that on many occasions, Hortensia, herself drove Wilber to the bank and literally led him up to the bank steps by the arm.

But through her untiring efforts ("relentless," while being, perhaps the more exact nuance, is somewhat unkind), Wilber had escaped his destiny as the affable town bum. He held a respectable position for thirty years with the bank, advancing to the post of first teller. He and Hortensia bought and paid for a comfortable though not pretentious home. They raised two children, a boy and a girl who were now both married and had children of their own. And Wilber had even once been elected water commissioner of the city.

Hortensia had indeed succeeded

at a herculean task.

And now, still affable, Wilber Minetree was about to surrender his mortal cloak, and the town said kind things about him and praised the remarkable woman who had been his helpmate all these years.

In the white two-story home where the Minetrees lived, Hortensia sat in a darkened room, clutching a damp handkerchief and weeping sporadically. The years had not changed her a great deal. Her bosom had become somewhat more imposing (again, "overwhelming" would be unkind), her mustache more pronounced, and her voice a bit more strident. But the latter could be excused on the basis of nodules which had developed on her vocal chords through the years of yelling at Wilber to get him out of bed on time.

The doctor came out of Wilber's room looking grave. (Doctors never look baffled; they look grave). He patted Hortensia on the shoulder consolingly and sighed. Hortensia's chin trembled at what she read in his face. "It's the end, isn't it?" she whimpered.

He sighed again. "I've done everything known to medical science, Hortensia. There—there isn't any—hope."

"How much longer?" she whispered.

He hesitated.

"Please," she begged. "I have to notify the family—"

He rubbed his chin. "He can't

last the night, Hortensia," he said gently. "Sometimes they'll rally for a while. But Wilber—" he shook his head again. "He can't last the night. . . ."

Hortensia took it bravely with the inner strength that had born her through thirty years of married life with Wilber Minetree.

She dried her tears, took a deep breath, and squared her shoulders. "Then I have a lot to do, don't I, Doctor?" she said with just a hint of a tremor in her voice.

He patted her shoulder. "You're a brave woman, Hortensia."

There was, indeed, much to be attended to. Getting out of this world is not a simple matter.

First Hortensia had to make a dozen long distance telephone calls to relatives, including their children who were scattered to the four corners of the globe. Their daughter was married to an army man and they were stationed in Germany. Their son and his family were at the present located in South America where he was connected with an oil company. Always the practical one, Hortensia had not troubled them with the seriousness of Wilber's illness, realizing there was nothing they could have done. They would, of course, want to be at the funeral.

Rounding up the clan and tearfully advising them of the impending funeral took most of the afternoon. It was good, however, to keep oneself busy at a time like

this. Hortensia then had to go down and discuss funeral arrangements with Jerome Reeves owner of the Reeves Mortuary. Hortensia had for many years been of the opinion that it was a grave error to leave such matters to the last minute when one was too upset by grief to have a clear head.

Accustomed as he was, to dealing with distraught relatives who were sitting ducks, Jerome was rather unnerved by Hortensia's practical and business-like approach to the matter. He had to stop dry-washing his hands and sharpen his pencil and when they were through, he was sweating through his shirt and grinding his teeth. She'd managed to get his best coffin, plus a choir, and all the excavation work at a third less than his usual price. The funeral was tentatively set for the day after tomorrow which allowed sufficient time for the relatives to fly home.

Hortensia then drove to Madeline's Dress Shoppe where she decided on a practical black outfit which could be altered and worn for many years to come.

Then there was the matter of Wilber's obituary for the Hesterton Advocate. This was a weekly paper, appearing on Friday, and since Friday was the date tentatively scheduled for the funeral, they were just able to work in the obituary. Thomas Seelingson, editor of the Advocate actually had the paper all made up for the week, but

Wilber was one of the community's leading citizens, so he jerked the hog auction story on page one in deference to Wilber's last minute obituary.

There were countless other small but important matters. The florist, for example. With the children flying all the way from Germany and South America, they wouldn't have time to order flowers. And the florist in this small town was so slow, often having to order flowers from the city. So Hortensia spent some time with the florist seeing to this matter. Then, with a house full of weeping relatives, sufficient food would be a pressing necessity. The Bluebonnet Cafe had a reasonable catering service and Hortensia arranged for them to deliver a quantity of fried chicken dinners to the house on Friday.

It was well after sundown when Hortensia returned to the house, exhausted. Miss Redding, the afternoon nurse was still with Wilber. Hortensia refreshed herself with a shower and a cup of hot tea. At ten o'clock, the night nurse, Mrs. Schien was supposed to come on duty. However, Hortensia could see no practical reason for having Mrs. Schien tonight. Wilber was in a coma. It was simply a matter of sitting at his bedside until he breathed his last.

Besides, Hortensia, in a sudden wave of sentimentality somewhat foreign to her nature, wished to spend the last hours with Wilber

alone. So she phoned Mrs. Schien, cancelling her services for the evening, and when Miss Redding left, Hortensia settled herself alone in Wilber's room beside his bed, to await the end.

Wilber's breathing became more and more shallow. The quiet hours of the night ticked slowly away. Hortensia glanced at the bedside clock from time to time, remembering with a fond and tearful smile that it was still set a half hour ahead. At times she dozed, her head nodding forward.

It was during one of these cat naps that Wilber yawned and sat up.

Hortensia came awake with a startled jump.

"Hello, Hortensia," Wilber smiled affably. "Where am I?"

Hortensia's mouth opened and worked, but for the first time in her life nothing came out.

Wilber looked around, bright-eyed, but slightly befuddled. "Oh, I remember. I've been sick, haven't I?"

Hortensia was still too stunned to utter a sound. Wilber had been in a coma for three days. He hadn't spoken rationally for a week. Now he was sitting up clear-eyed and in full possession of his faculties.

"H—how do you feel, Wilber?" she finally gasped.

"Me? Oh, I feel fine. Only I'm awful hungry. You got something in the house to eat, Hortensia?"

She groped her way to her feet,

clutching at the chair for support.

"Some cold roast beef maybe," he said, "or a drumstick. And a bottle of beer."

She stumbled out of the room toward the kitchen.

"See if you have any of those good homemade pickles of yours in the refrigerator," he called after her.

She fumbled blindly at the refrigerator. Wilber had rallied. The doctor said that on rare occasions patients in Wilber's condition did rally, though he hadn't thought it possible in Wilber's case. Hortensia remembered when Leona McPhail's husband had been in that coma last year and not expected to live the day out, he'd rallied unexpectedly and hung on for a whole month. And old man Marreth who fell down with that stroke on main street. The doctor said he wouldn't live until they got him to the hospital. Well, that was two years ago and the old geezer wasn't any more dead than the doctor.

Hortensia was too upset to pay any attention to what she was doing. She automatically got some food on the tray and started back to Wilber's room. But her mind was swimming with the monstrous inconvenience that this unexpected turn of events had caused. Everything had been so well organized and timed. Now Wilber had thrown a monkey wrench into the plans throwing everything into a hopeless snarl.

It was too late to stop the relatives. By now they were on trains and airplanes converging on Hesterton. By tomorrow night the house would be swarming with relatives. Why, they might have to hang around for a week or more now, waiting for the funeral. They'd eat up a fortune in food, and her son would lose important time from his job in South America, and her daughter's husband might not have that much emergency leave from his army post in Germany. The florist had already wired for a huge order of flowers due to arrive tomorrow. They'd be completely wilted and ruined. And the obituary in the Advocate. Good heavens, she'd forgotten about

that! Mr. Seelingson was starting to print the paper tonight. It would be too late to take that out now.

Completely distraught, she brought the tray into Wilber's room and put it beside his bed. He smiled at her good-naturedly. "I sure am hungry, Hortensia."

"Lay back down, Wilber," she said distractedly. "You'll tax your strength."

Obediently, he settled back against his pillow. She picked up another pillow, clapped it down firmly over his face smothering him.

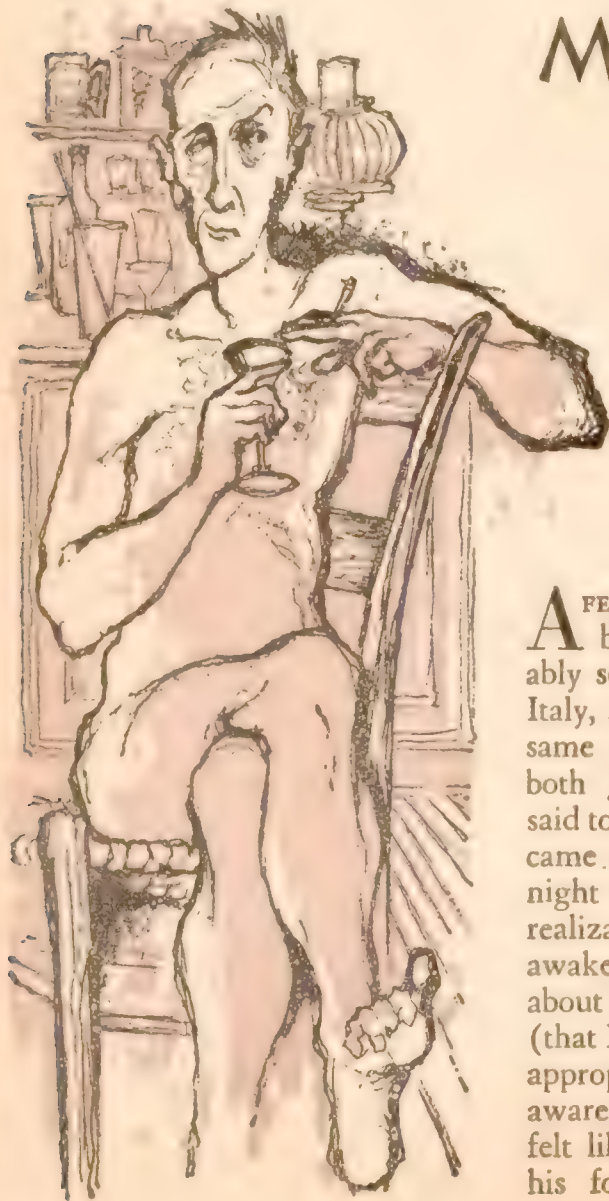
He struggled weakly. "Lie still, Wilber!" she panted. "For heaven's sake, if it weren't for me, you'd be late to your own funeral!"



Two kinds of woman, two kinds of vice, and a different kind of private eye who solves the case not only without leaving home . . . but without getting dressed.

SMUGGLER'S MONKEY

BY
ARNE
MANN



A FEW DAYS AGO I had a small but beautifully built and remarkably serviceable tape recorder from Italy, and also a young lady of the same description. Now they are both gone, and, as the saying is said to go, I miss the machine. They came and went all of a winter's night and early morning. Painful realization that I was actually awake, and not dreaming, came at about four or perhaps five a.m. (that I had *come to* would be more appropriate) and I was dimly aware that something was amiss. I felt like the soldier who sat up in his fox hole the day the guns

stopped blasting and cried, "What's that!" In my bemused condition I thought that possibly the bedroom was on fire, and that if so I should do something appropriate, such as looking for my pajamas and getting the hell out of it. However, I could only lie on my back limply watching the red light flickering curiously on the corner of the ceiling, listening to a peculiar flapping sound. A quick crackling noise. It seemed much easier to speak than to move, so I asked the little lump at my side, "Is the room on fire?"

There was no answer, except the deep, heavy breathing that comes with alcoholic slumber, and I turned painfully to regard the rise and fall of her lush breasts which seemed, in the red light, and to my burning eyes, like two troubled hills on a tropical island, which would momentarily be consumed in volcanic disaster. Well, that's how *my* mind works. I carefully slid off the bed and braced myself against the radiator cover. The expected pain shot up to my ankles. There was a vodka bottle on my finger, which I had evidently been using as a cork. I considered the bottle, and considered the little Italian model (the tape recorder, not the tropic isle) and watched the little red light on it flickering. It was a loose light! which accounted for the "fire" on the ceiling. The end of the tape snapped round and round, and that was the sound of the fire. I flipped the switch to *off*. Comparative

darkness and calm settled over the tropics, and I sighed. While I had slept the music had run out, the concert had ended. I didn't know that a new one was about to begin, or that the conductor's baton would have a handle and a trigger.

I felt lousey. I went to the bathroom, and then to the bar in my living room, still a walking cork for the bottle, which had enough poison left for one more good dose. Between us we had evidently finished almost the entire quart before passing out. Now, I was determined, for some odd reason, to make *this* drink a perfect martini. Not just another slug. Four to one, it would be, with ice and an olive and a toothpick . . . and even with vermouth. I become very old fashioned when I am blue or crocked, which is usually at the same time. I broke ice out of the little refrigerator and patiently prepared the cocktail, looking forward to the first cool sip. I could hear my island breathing behind me, and the sound was vaguely disturbing. But I was in no shape to pin point why. Training had once taught me to respond to sounds which, like myself, didn't quite belong . . . and that is doubtless why the quiet flapping of the tape spool had roused me from my stupor in the first place. However, as I splashed the colorless, odorless, tasteless, toxic contents of my finger's friend over the ice, I heard a sound which was, even in the shape I was in, unmistakable . . . to me.

The hammer of a revolver had been cocked.

Instantly I collapsed below the bar top. It was a reflex which had not yet been short-circuited by the booze. No shot followed, however. Instead a velvet voice cooed, "They're on top of the counter." I said nothing. I wasn't even breathing.

"The olives," the voice explained.

I did not recognize this voice. It was a sweet voice, and a neat voice; but though her voice was charming, it was the wrong voice. That hadn't been my little Italian island I'd heard breathing behind me.

"I'm not looking for olives," I croaked. "I'm looking for a way out."

What I was really looking for was a police special I keep behind a row of bottles, mainly because I spend most of my time in that corner of the room. It wasn't there. The phantom spoke again. "Come out come out, I know where you are."

I decided that if she had been going to shoot me she would have shot me by then, so I straightened up and had my first look, my first fascinated ogle, at the face which owned the voice. My phantom was a phantom of pure delight. Somehow, the weapon she pointed at me spoiled what was otherwise a *completely* delightful effect, however. She sat daintily on the couch facing the bar and me, behind it. I poured more liquor into the carafe and reached under the counter. She

raised the gun (which was mine!) and I hastily told her, "... need more booze." And I put a second cocktail glass quickly on the bar.

"None for me, thank you all the same," she said quietly and politely.

I shrugged my shirtless shoulders. "Just as well, there's no room anyway. No room, no room." I waved her away.

"There's *plenty* of room," she countered.

Of course, I knew what classic of literature I had been quoting, but I was just a little startled to have her toss the next line back at me. Coincidence, of course. However, when I next said, "Then have some tea," she looked all around the bar, saw nothing on it but bottles, and she said, "I don't see any tea."

"There isn't any."

"Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it," and she was almost angry. TOO much! I had a pretty strong notion I was *not* dreaming this . . . and I knew that we weren't having a tea party. Yet, here we were, right in the middle of Chapter VII. I was enjoying it. Any friend of Lewis Carroll is a friend of mine, even if she was pointing my gun at me.

While all of this dialogue was being remembered from somewhere in our youths, both of which had obviously been misspent, I was busy making the best martini I could, measuring with my naked and not so private eye and rotating an ice

cube in the stemmed glass as cleverly as I knew how. It suddenly flew off the rim and landed on the rug at her feet. She didn't bat an eye, flinch a muscle, or move the gun from her lap. I considered this a fortunate lesson and decided that I would not attempt to disarm her, as would any self-respecting television hero. I am not now, nor was I ever, a hero. Which perhaps is one reason why I am alive. I reminded myself of this philosophy as I finished the preparations. There were then two immediate steps to be taken. (1) pour my drink and (2) drink it.

She waved the gun at a chair across from the corner of the coffee table. "Suppose you come over here now, and we'll have a little chat," she said.

I shrugged and came around the bar, with nothing that I hadn't been born with, of course, except the martini. Perhaps this was a dream after all. Again, she didn't blink an eyelash. Either she wasn't impressed, which I will reluctantly admit was possible, or she was really as cool and as dangerous as the revolver. I seated myself in the chair and nonchalantly crossed my hairy legs. "Cheers" I said, as cheerily as I thought the occasion deserved. The situation's whimsey had begun to fascinate my marinated mind. I began to ignore everything real about my circumstances (which was little enough) and to wonder what I would have said if we were in a bar. No, a train. A club car.

Two strangers speeding toward a common destiny. As casually as I could, as inadequate as it may have been, I simply said, "Have we met before?"

"No sir," says she.

And she smiled. What it was, her lips thinned to an impudent line and the line seemed to want to turn up at the corners, but she said not a word more. I finished my cocktail in the now respectful silence, and we regarded each other frankly. She was tall and abundant, my mysterious nocturnal visitor, and, of course, as beautiful as a movie star. What kind of story would this be if she weren't. She wore a light topcoat, open to reveal a remarkably snug wool dress. My appreciation of the delectable and obvious fact that her dress was loaded with everything it had been designed to hold was marred, slightly, by the certain knowledge that so was the gun she held in her pretty little hand in her pretty little lap. Lucky gun. There was something else I thought I saw, as I ogled her boldly. Training, again.

"Take some more tea," I said, very earnestly.

"I've had nothing yet," Alice replied in an offended tone, "so I can't take more."

"You mean you can't take less."

She said nothing, this time. I picked up my glass, but put it down again because it was empty. She invited me to make another for myself. However, I realized that either

the danger or the challenge of my situation had triggered still another reaction (I'm just a mass of reactions—training, as I've mentioned) and I could not possibly get up just then to go to the bar, or anywhere. I asked *her* to make the drink, still seated, legs crossed, cosmopolitan as hell and determined to persuade myself I was an Englishman. They never lose their reserve. She said I should make the drink, and she had the gun.

"Oh well, what the hell" I thought, and rose. This time the line became lips and the lips laughed. I turned my back to her and strode, as dignified as I could, to the bar. With my behind behind it I shrugged and laughed too. She was kind enough to follow me back to the bar. She walked funny.

"Who are you," I suddenly asked her, "Why are you here, and if you're not going to use my gun may I please have it back?"

Grinning she handed it over to me. "I haven't the foggiest . . . how to use it anyway," she said.

I actually dropped the carafe, in which I was mixing a new drink, realizing how close I had come to being the newest face in the here-after. I've had many weapons pointed at me, but at least they were in the hands of people who could keep them from going off. I asked her how she had found it.

"I was hiding behind the bar, and after about a half hour or so I just saw it there."

"Why were you hiding behind my bar, please?"

"I thought it would be more comfortable than the closet, where I hid first."

I told her she had missed the point. She was now lazily drawing circles on the bar in the vodka I had spilled. "Why were you hiding in this part of the forest at all," I asked her. "Are you lost?"

"You know anybody who isn't?"

That was all I needed, a philosopher.

"I was waiting for you to go to sleep," she went on, "but you have a large capacity for . . . staying awake." It wasn't what she meant, but it was decent of her. I thought fleetingly about Toni, in the bedroom, but there were more immediate matters directly at hand. I didn't bother to ask the kook how she had gotten in. I had probably left the door unlocked, or the window open, or more likely she had come down the rabbit hole, like the other Alice.

"Tell me a story," I said sweetly, but firmly. This was her story:

"Once upon a time there was a nice lady who wanted to go on a long trip and look at some water. So she got in a taxi cab and then she got in a train and when she came to a big city she got on a big boat and she sailed away to the Mediterranean Sea. She spent many happy days in the warm white sun looking at the cool blue water, and when this big boat got near the big

city where they had started from the nice lady's waitress came to her and said, "Nice Lady, I have bought a marvelous little tape recorder in Naples, for less than half what I would pay for it in the States. I can only bring in ten dollars worth of merchandise duty free because I am a crew member, but you are a passenger and can manifest five hundred dollars worth of goodies, so if you have not already purchased that much will you declare my hi fi for me and take it off as your own, and I will pick it up from you afterwards, and I will appreciate that very much indeed. Well, she was such a friendly little lass that the Nice Lady, who wasn't *that* nice, said to herself, "Why not!" and she said to the pretty waitress, "Glad to!" and she took the pretty little stereophonic contraband into her cabin and told the mean old customs officials it was her very own. Also, this nice lady had purchased some interesting stones, one time when she hadn't been dancing or watching the water, and she thought, why, what a perfectly lovely way to avoid paying the duty on these pretty stones, so she unscrewed the top cover of the tape recorder and put them inside, and thought how she would take them out later on. Well, what do you think? No sooner did she get to her hotel when there came a knock on her door. It wasn't the customs men at all, as you may have thought, but the pretty little head waitress, now

all dressed up in going ashore clothes, and she said, "I have gotten off sooner than I thought, so I came directly here and I will take the machine now, and thank you ever so much and I hope you had a pleasant voyage. Now, the Nice Lady had had such a fright, thinking she had been caught smuggling, that she decided she could not risk telling the little waitress about the jewels, so she let her take the tape recorder away, and then she put on her coat and followed her, thinking that after she had gone to sleep she would quietly slip in and unscrew the top and take out her jewels and get into a cab and pick up her bags and get back on the train and go home and wear the pretty stones everywhere, so all of her friends would be envious and say, "Next year *we* must take a cruise."

I had been watching her carefully, as she recited this brief history, and as my own brain cleared a bit I confirmed one impression: this *was* a tea party, after all. Also I changed my mind about something else. She was no nut. When she stopped talking I could easily piece the rest of the story in for her. Toni hadn't gone home, she had come straight here, as she usually did when her ship docked. This was her home for the three days it took the DECLARATION to turn around. So Old Smuggler here had trailed Young Smuggler to Henry-the-Fence's saloon, slipped in behind her, watched the show from

one or another vantage point(!) and been caught by the proprietor crossing from the bar.

"What were you wandering around the room for when I woke up?" I wanted to know. "Why didn't you just grab the loot and scoot. We must have been out to the world . . . even your world . . . for at least a couple of hours."

"You were, finally," she agreed. "But you left that damned tape recorder going, and I was afraid if I stopped the music you'd wake up. I was right too. You came out here as soon as the music ended. I was on my way in when you came wandering through looking for the bathroom, so I sat down on the couch and waited some more for you to go back to bed. How was I to know you were going to get fancy at this stage of the game?"

This reminded me of my earlier compulsion for a real gentleman's drink, and I poured what was left in the carafe into a glass. As it burned into my guts I couldn't decide what had made me think it was such a great idea in the first place.

"What is the idea of waving this at me then?"—holding up the gun.

"When I found it I didn't know were you a cop or what, and I figured if you caught me taking the machine I could point it at you. Incidentally, what are you, are you a cop?" I knew she didn't think I was.

"I'm a customs inspector," I told her, but indifferently.

"Are you a hood," she ignored my statement, and seemed to hope I was indeed some kind of hood.

"Noo-oo." My voice was evil. "One more guess and then you're mine."

"Glorioski!" she said in mock alarm. She stood up on the rungs of the stool and looked impudently over the bar. Reseating herself she looked over her shoulder to the bedroom. Then she grinned and said the one word. "Incredible."

It was, at that.

However, her last guess was correct, or almost, which is just as well, I suppose, full wool dress notwithstanding.

"You're a private eye named Rumpelstilskin" she said.

I confessed it. "At least I was until the eye got bloodshot. Look, crook, this whole morning is entirely unlikely. Lets just go wake up Toni and get some affirmation."

The room was by now disgustingly hazy with early morning daylight, and it was no longer fun to be running around like Peter Pan . . . or is it just plain Pan? "You first," I said, and followed her inside. The bed was empty. Toni was gone and the tape recorder was gone.

I whirled, glaring at Alice-in-Wonderland, but it was immediately apparent that she was just as surprised as I was, for the first thing she did, almost in panic, was to look at her watch.

"How much time do we have to

find that recorder . . ." I said.

She slumped onto the bed. "A few hours." Then she added, "If I'm lucky I'll be dead by then." She was perfectly serious.

—2—

What had become of Toni? The capacity for carrying immense quantities of liquor which legend has attributed to sailors is one thing, and Toni's condition when last I'd been with her was another. Perhaps female sailors were exceptions, and this one had been, like, out. And should have stayed out at least until noon, considering the party we had had. Was Alice, then, a decoy? Was Toni kidnapped? She mixed with a lot of oddballs; what was she caught up in?

Then another thought flashed alarmingly across the cinemascope screen of my mind. When I get pictures I get moving pictures, in color—In this one Toni was being awakened by our voices, earlier. Boozily she wobbles to the door, regards the scene in the Living Room. SCENE IN LIVING ROOM: Nude Man seated comfortably in armchair, sipping martini and talking to Other Woman. *Of course!* With the couch's high back to Toni, she can't see anything but the woman's head and not only doesn't she recognize the 'Nice Lady' but she thinks that Alice, too, must be similarly attired. Unattired, that is. She blows her cork,

then just blows. In the next scene she is hurriedly slipping only her coat on, and with clothing over one arm and my present in the other, because I no longer deserve it, she slips out the kitchen door unobserved by everyone except old Ed Royal, who lives across the hall and whose door always seems to open when mine does, day or night. I would get a call from Old Ed later on. "Hey, Henry, you tiger. Tossing them out without even letting them dress! Hey, you dog Hank, toss them in here why don't you when you're finished with them." Now the scene changes again. Toni has pulled up in front of the pier and is stumbling from a cab. She waves at Joe, or Jim, or whatever the hell the night watchman's name is. He knows her and all the crew members, naturally, and passes her through the gate. She is headed for the ship, and her cabin. Where else would she go. She is smuggling the stuff right back on board the *Declaration*. On board! My heart sinks as I think of her in jail, poor little Toni.

As the scene fades I realize that two martinis is really six ounces of alcohol, and I am not quite as sober as I might have been upon arising to find my room on fire. Poor little Toni hell! Poor little Henry. Not one, but two smugglers to involve him. And one thing I knew I knew: it wasn't jewelry that had led this filly to my stable, and she was definitely one gift horse I was

going to look in the mouth. First I was looking elsewhere, however, for she was sprawled carelessly across the rumpled sheets, and although she was quite unaware of the provocative effect of her position, I was aware of it. Her nervous twisting, even though it brought to mind something not quite so lovely, was still the cause of an interesting, if disconcerting tableau. From time to time she would reach to scratch herself, her legs, her breasts, the back of her neck, her shoulders. She would twist and jerk.

"I think we should to your place go, quick like," I told her, after a moment or two of looking.

She merely shook her head from side to side. "You think I'd be here if any was there," she said, and it was reasonable. Then she sat erect abruptly and, staring straight at me, through me it seemed, said, "Your girl friend's house: it's in the machine."

I told her my "girl friend" was by then back on the ship, and her lips became a saucy line just before her whole face just gave up, again. But for that quick minisecond she had been genuinely amused.

"After all I did to get it off, too," was the only thing she said.

Soon her need would be urgent. She would have to get up and go somewhere. I didn't want to lose her, and I didn't want to go with her. As it turned out, it didn't matter, as she knew no one in this city and had no one to go to. Looking

at me hopefully, helplessly, all of her earlier sophistication gone, she told me I was to take her to it. She must have assumed that knowing all I did without being told any of it, I knew my way along that trade route. I could have found out quickly, by a few brief telephone calls, to old contacts, where the caravans went now, but I figured I was in enough trouble, so I refused. There was no way for us to get on the pier . . . and there was nothing to do at all but sit and wait for Toni to call or come back, neither of which was at all likely. I couldn't give Alice over to the police because I had to find out what Toni and I were in, how deep we were in it, and how we could get out. The best way to get out is to keep out in the first place, and I had certainly been minding my own business, this time, but the "T" in Henry T. Hooker is for 'trouble' and no doubt about that.

"How big is your habit," I asked her.

"It was bigger," she said, which didn't seem like much of an answer, until she explained. "I'm coming down from monkey to zero. . . . A month ago it was two grains. I cut to half of that, then half of that. I've almost kicked it. I can kick it with what's in that tape recorder."

I believed her. And I told her she'd kick it alright. Cold turkey. She closed her eyes and groaned. Withdrawal is nasty. It was going

to be awful for her, and exhausting for me, especially in the shape I was in. I told her I'd find some cough medicine in the bathroom, the codein in it might help, and some paregoric. We both knew it would actually be of little use. I assured her I'd stay with her until she had kicked the monkey. I hoped I could. We still had time, and nothing to do with it, and I wanted to hear another story. "This time no more fairy tales," I told her.

"Then it will be very dull," she said. "I'm sure you've heard it before." I had heard it, at least variations of it, but it wasn't exactly dull.

She was one of those restless, rootless, aimless women who try one thing after another . . . for kicks. A marriage or two, an affair or two or three, some gambling, a lot of drinking. Finally she had picked up with an exciting crowd, exciting because outside the law. They wore tuxedos and had good manners and traveled fast, so she overlooked the insidiousness of their evil, heartless business . . . the most disgusting of all. It was only a matter of time before she was "joy popping"—as occasional users of narcotics are called, and finally she had been "hooked". Then, a month ago, her friends made a big mistake. They used her for a messenger boy. She was completely trusted, but she was a user, and so she had until then been carried as a beautiful accessory, but kept out of the operation. How-

ever, they needed someone in a hurry for a routine pickup, and, ill advised as it had been, they let her go. It was the cruise on the *Declaration*, which stopped at Naples and, although unscheduled, also at my apartment.

I've been in the railroad station at Naples; it is one of the ugliest in all of Europe. And through it appropriately passes some of the ugliest traffic. From the huge poppy fields of Turkey, Iran and Yugoslavia, as concerns this tale, came crude opium which was converted to a morphine base by the simplest of chemical processes in simple Neapolitan kitchens.

"All I had to do was bring it back," Alice was saying. "I held out forty grains to finish kicking it, and I had some left, to hold me until I got back to Chicago. But its in the tape recorder now."

I wanted to know how she had intended to get it off the ship if Toni had not come to her from out of nowhere with that tape recorder. Well, she was just going to put it in her purse and walk off. She would have made it too, of course. Uncut, it makes a tiny package, and unless there is a tip off, passengers are not generally searched.

Had no one on the entire vessel noticed her odd behavior. No, she had kept to her room most of the time, sweating it out, seeing no one but Toni, who brought her an occasional tray, and sweets all the time. Candy, sweet rolls, jelly,

bowls of sugar. It had never occurred to Toni to wonder what was wrong with her,—probably a lush—and she had written it off thus.

Then I wanted to know how she had gotten the rest of the stuff off and where that was. She had not gotten it off. It was still on board. So was Toni, and the tape recorder.

Growing increasingly uneasy, Alice explained about the pick-up for the bulk of the stuff. "There's this *drop* there," she said, "Someone, someday, cut a little piece of moulding loose over a door in the corridor on B deck, and it's hollow . . . so I just put the packet in there. It was a little bag, you know, and next sailing day someone will pick it up and in all the confusion of friends seeing friends off, he just walks off the pier with it. Simple?"

"Yeh," I grunted. "But Customs isn't! Who are these clowns anyway, to think they can get away with a stunt like that? Don't they know there's a customs search each time the ship comes in? On that run especially."

She grinned, that line again. "My 'clowns' as you call them, have been doing this for almost a year, off and on; the ship docks around eight a.m. As soon as it clears, which is by, say nine, and the passengers leave, an outfit comes on to repaint the public spaces. All cruise ships are given a shiny new coat before each trip, and the corridors get it every two, three trips. Before the

customs men get to the drop, it's painted over, and they just don't see those two tiny cracks in the moulding, that's all."

Now who was simple, I thought.

"How do you feel," I asked her.

"I'll be all right for a while I suppose," but she didn't look like she could take too long a while.

I told her I was going to take a shower. I knew she'd stay there. She needed the help I was going to give her, and I needed the icy needles at the back of my neck to clear what I laughingly called my brain. I went into the bathroom, but I couldn't take the shower. Someone was in it. It was Toni.

—3—

She was sitting on the tape recorder, sipping from a bottle. As I pulled back the shower curtain she smiled and replaced the bottle at her lips with a finger. "Shh-hh," she hissed.

I pulled her out of the tub and emptied it quickly of her clothes, which she had not bothered to put on, and turned on the shower. Under cover of the noise made by the splashing water she said to me, "Get rid of her," and pointed in that exaggerated manner of all drunks to the door and beyond it.

"Wha . . . Toni!!—what . . ." I was almost as incoherent as she was, but for another reason. "What are you doing here! What's the idea of making us think you were

gone? Toni!" I sounded foolish in my own ears. And on top of the whole thing, all I could think of at that incredulous moment in that ludicrous situation, was: poor Ed Royal. He'd never see her skipping down the hall, coat flying open, outside my apartment, and he'd certainly never know what he was missing inside it. Or would he?

Tony *had* come to the door of Wonderland, of course, while I was talking to Alice . . . but she had heard the story of the jewels and made sense of it. She had decided to keep the pretty stones! She had pretended to be gone so Alice would leave also, so we could open the machine and take a fortune in jewels out of it.

"I'll take a couple of trips off, and we can lividuppl!" Toni explained. Booze drooled down along her chin unnoticed and she was grinning like the cat that ate the canary. So it seemed that Alice was not the only one who kept bad company. Toni did, and so, it was painfully obvious, did I.

I stared at the machine as though I had Superman's X-ray vision. I could almost see the little package inside the cover, the one which had made the light flicker; the machine's light and Alice's light. I could break it out and give her the fix. I believed her story of coming off it, and I could see she was close to zero. But a hardness crept into me. A remembrance and a determination I hadn't been disturbed

with for many moons and many bottles. I would stand over her later while pain twisted her guts, and I would say to her, "What are their names?" and she would groan with aching and sweating, and I'd hold up that little fix and say, "This is the price: all their names" and she would name the monsters, because she would be so cold, so impossibly cold and she would itch and twitch and her liver would twist inside her like a broken bottle, and pain would tear at her belly from inside. I would stand over her and watch this and I would hold the stuff before her and she would tell me anything I asked. No price is ever too much for a junkie to pay, when he needs it. And she would need it. I would never get the information from her any other way. In an operation of the nature she had gone and involved herself in, a loose mouth means a broken neck. But her neck would be no consideration at a time like that. I could, of course, have called the law, and let them torture her, then toss her on a cot to sweat it out cold turkey. One way or another she would tell anything, everything, just to be hit with it, and my way seemed most merciful.

I grabbed the bottle away from Toni and told her to stick her finger down her throat. She wouldn't. I grabbed her by the back of the neck and did it for her. Afterwards I pushed her under the icy shower water, and got in with her, holding

my hand over her mouth to stifle her yipes and squeals. I didn't know how much the cold would do her good, but *I* needed that shower. Before turning the water off I slapped Toni hard a few times, and said, "There are no jewels in the damned thing, do you understand? No jewels."

"Son of a bitch," she spluttered.

"No jewels," I repeated, slapping her again. "Say it."

She said it. "No jools." I had no idea whether she knew what she meant. I turned the water off and told her to stay there until or unless I called for her. I didn't want Alice to know the stuff was here until she needed it. But as I was about to open the door it opened from the outside, and there stood Alice, once more pointing my gun at me.

—4—

The next scene of this comedy was played in the kitchen. Toni, bottle in hand, was seated at the table. Alice, gun in hand, was at the sink. Henry, tape recorder in hand, was by the stove.

"Put it on the table," Alice ordered, "and open it."

I put it on the table. "I tell you again," I told her again, "I didn't know she was in there. On the level."

"Open it," she said, adding, "I believe you." From the tone of her voice I was to understand that she certainly did *not* believe me. I told

her further that I didn't have a screw driver in the house. She found a nail file in her pocketbook and tossed it to me. She also withdrew a small kit. I knew what was in it.

"Don't," I begged her. "You can kick it cold. It'll be over by tonight."

Early morning sunlight bounced brightly from the white enameled kitchen appliances, but we were anything but bright ourselves.

"Open it," she said again, dangerously waving the gun she didn't know how to use. "What else will be over by tonight? What will you know by then, my friend? That private eye of yours isn't so blood-shot anymore. Open the machine."

I threw the nail file on the table. "This won't do it," I said. "They're Phillips screws. I need a Phillips screw driver."

Alice stared incredulously, disbelief in her eyes, refusal to believe, fear of believing. If she had had a million dollar bill in her hand, only to have the wind blow it away from her, she couldn't have been more completely awed. "I remember," she muttered. "I had to get one from the ship's purser." Then she heaved in a tremendous breath and seemed to brace herself, as common sense once again, or possibly for the first time, filtered into the room. "Pry it off, for crying out loud! Pry it off!" she cried. "Break it, what the hell do I care. I'll blast it off."

If I didn't get the gun away from

her it would go off accidentally. Her hand was shaking almost violently. She was shaking almost all over. She was coughing from time to time, a little dry junkie cough.

"Put that thing down and listen to me," I said quickly. "Even if I get it out, you can't fix yourself. And time is running out for you. You sit down and tell me what I want to know and I will cut it, I will melt it, and I'll make you all right."

Toni peacefully sipped from her bottle as I took my gun back from Alice for the second time. I wished I had pockets for it, but instead I pulled the clip out, tossed it into a kitchen drawer, and the gun into another. Alice was running her fingers pitifully over the plastic cover of the tape deck, where a sixteenth of an inch away was both her salvation and her death warrant. She had to meet my terms, of course. She was beginning to perspire already. I got a pencil and paper for the names, none of which were at all familiar to me. I asked her the name of the man she had met in Naples. She told me again how the bulk of the stuff would be picked up on sailing day, Friday. It was now the morning of Wednesday, so it would sit on the ship for the rest of the two days and we would be through with our business in that time. Alice was the missing link between the import and export parts of this business.

We broke open the machine. She was pale and soaked through from cold perspiration by the time we were ready, and several times she had begun to heave, over and over, with nothing coming up at all. But as she instructed me and between us we got the syringe properly filled and I tied a tie around her bicep and I fed her.

She sighed as it hit her. It still hit her like a train, she said. Not a runaway locomotive, the way two and three grains do . . . but a quarter grain was at least like a backsliding caboose. It smashed right into her. She had itched and retched, but as the bloodstream carried it through her system she began to sigh.

"Hmmm-mm" and "umm-mm" and she came out of it weeping and then we talked as she pulled her wool dress off, because she was sweating so. She sponged the water away with a towel and fell quietly asleep. I finished undressing her, since everything she wore was soaked, and not because she was any longer desirable, after what I'd seen and helped her go through. I put her under a clean sheet.

Toni, grey faced and sad, her head propped on a shoe and her hand around her bottle, had passed out on the floor. I dropped a blanket over her and slipped, with a sigh of my own, under that clean sheet, next to Alice. When we awoke I would make a few phone calls, and Wonderland would be gone.

I PARKED on the ridge and looked down into the golden territory. Mark would be there, canvassing that valley suburb of watered lawns and trimmed evergreens. Mark Garrett was the ace of my crew; the golden boy with the silver tongue and cheek of brass.

In a way, Mark, I hate to lose you. In another way, I want to spill your blood in the street and walk

He jabbed the doorbell and buffed his shoes on his pants. He smiled at the closed door and waited.

I waited too. My necktie fluttered in the breeze, but I wasn't cool. The binoculars were slick under my palms and sweat filmed the eye-pieces. I jerked a white handkerchief from my breast pocket and cleaned them.

SALES PITCH

You couldn't ask for a better salesman than Mark Garrett. His boss knew how good he was . . . and so did the boss's wife.

BY MARK STARR

through it barefoot.

I rested my arms on the car door and raised the binoculars. Mark was striding up the sidewalk to a ranch-type brick house. You'd never take him for a salesman, particularly a maggie. He was Joe College picking up his date; tall, breezy and all-American with his blond brushcut waxed, jacket loose around his wrists.

Nerves, Webb boy. You're coming apart like an off-balance fly-wheel. You've never killed a man before; you want to cut him down and run like a hurricane. Death Row is crowded with guys who moved when the odds were wrong.

A woman answered the door, wearing a black dress and silver earrings. She gave Mark a thin-eyed look.

I'm not buying anything, said her pinched lips!

But she didn't know Mark. He handed her the classic pitch, the way I laid it out for him when I taught him the trade. First the little joke to chase the tight lines from her face. Next he pulled the catalog folder from his hip pocket. He touched her arm with the folder, then released it. She had to catch it or let it fall.

Ah, she caught it.

Mark's pad appeared in his hand; he wrote down her name and address, never slowing up the patter. She looked at the folder, shaking her head more and more slowly, like a mechanical doll with its battery running down.

Now came the small nod: *Yes, I read that one sometimes, but—*

Mark laid the receipt gently in her hand. She regarded it with a vague, puzzled expression, then led the way inside.

Mark could turn a woman's will to marshmallow. He could talk them into anything. If he told them North was South, they'd head for the arctic in a Bikini.

Too bad he had a weakness for other men's wives. Sometimes he browsed through his territory like a fox in a pen of plump, passive hens. I'd warned him a dozen times. Once he came off territory with his sportcoat ripped and his face decorated by hairline scratches; he'd left a woman's house through a thorn bush.

"What if you don't hear the husband next time?" I asked. "The woman panics. Instinctively she screams rape. Her old man pounds you to a bloody pulp and calls the law."

Mark gave me his fed-tiger grin. "Some of your boys unwind with a cold beer, Webb. With me it takes a woman."

"Uh-huh. Someday you'll get shot right out of the saddle."

Remember, Mark? You said you could think of worse ways to go. I laughed, but I'm not laughing now. Last night, you played in my territory.

I gripped the binocs so tight my fingers hurt. I could still see Mona's white fingers curled in his waxed hair. The diamonds on her wedding band had glittered in the pink light from the nightstand. A sick hatred had curdled in my stomach; it took all my strength to back from the hotel room and leave him with my wife, because the odds were wrong . . .

I watched Mark leave the brick house with a swinging, jaunty stride. From the door, the woman smiled at his back. Soon her glow would fade; she'd wonder why the hell she'd let him in and swear never to open the door to another salesman.

Mark drew an old woman at the next house. He gave her a soft pitch and shoved off without making a score. His next customer was fat. He spent less than a minute

with her, not even trying. He jazzed up his pace, bypassing women with maids or kids home from school.

He'd made his sales quota; he was prowling for flesh.

I'd been waiting for it; now I started sweating . . .

It was nearly four when Mark zeroed in on a dark-eyed ash-blond in her middle twenties. She answered the door of a two-story colonial, wearing black toreadors which she must've sewed herself into. Her white knit jersey was tight enough to answer any other questions a man had.

Mark found her funnybone in ten seconds flat. When she laughed, her hips jerked as though she'd backed against a hot steam pipe. Mark laughed with her, as though his coming were the biggest boff since the invention of the pratfall.

I felt a twist of envy as they went inside. The lad was greased lightning. I saw him cup his palm over her sheathed buttock as he kicked the door shut with his foot.

I looked behind the house. Thick shrubbery bordered the backyard; a hill sloped upward to a road. The layout was a dream.

My hands were slippery on the wheel as I drove around and stopped above the house. My knees turned to jello halfway down the slope; I stumbled and rolled under the hedge, heaving like a marathon runner with a bad cigaret habit.

After a minute, I inched along

the hedge and dashed across the patio. A hallway led me to a stone-floored kitchen with brass kettles hanging from a fireplace. I crouched behind the counter which divided the cooking section from the dining room. My shirt was soaked.

I heard the woman's husky voice from the next room. "I think I'd like another drink."

"Nervous?" asked Mark. "You act like you're expecting someone."

"No, I just thought . . . *mmm-mm*." Her voice came again a moment later, archly scolding. "Stop that."

"Honey, it's after four. I haven't much time."

Mark, how right you are.

Another silence, then her voice: "Wait, you'll tear it."

The next silence lasted two minutes, then her voice came taut and breathless. "Please. This is too . . ."

Mark whispered something inaudible and she said, "All right. Let's go upstairs."

I gave them five minutes, then catfooted up the carpeted stairs. A bathroom stood open at the end of the hall with a closed door on either side. I heard her voice on my left.

"I really would like another drink."

She'd had time to think on the way up. Now she was nervous. It was like selling; you couldn't ease up the pressure.

"Later," said Mark. "Can I help with that?"

"No, look. It'd be better if I didn't—"

"No. Everything. Save your cleaning bills."

"I was thinking about the time," she mumbled.

But Mark isn't, honey. He's thinking how silly you'd look blowing the whistle on him with all your clothes off, neatly folded, and no sign of a struggle. He's clever, honey . . .

I needed a weapon. I couldn't take them both with my bare hands.

The gods who watch over husbands must have put the golf bag in the hall. I pulled out an iron, remembering how Mark enjoyed waving his golf scores in my face. A joke on him. Ha. I wasn't laughing as I waited outside the door. My legs felt limp as yesterday's celery. My hands trembled, and the club clattered faintly against the wall.

"What was that?" asked the woman.

Mark's voice was petulant. "Honey, come on. It's four-thirty."

"Shouldn't I . . . look around first?"

"Like that?" Mark laughed. "Come here."

She mumbled something about the neighbor's kids. The bed creaked. A leaky faucet made musical blips in the bathroom. A kid yelled in the street.

I didn't even know the woman's name. *Too bad, Goldilocks. You*

shouldn't have let in the wolf. Now you're part of the plan.

I sifted it through my mind. Do the job, then call her husband. Drive to lookout, wait until he comes home, then call cops, disguising voice: *Hurry! Someone's getting killed at 22 Canyon Drive.* Go back to work and prepare look of horror for the time they tell me my ace salesman has been killed in action.

The odds were good. I gripped the club and pushed open the door. The scene was a rerun of last night's performance, except that it wasn't my wife's hair spread out on the pillow this time.

"Mark," I said, holding the club behind me. "Golden Boy."

He shot a wild look over his shoulder. "Webb! What the hell—!"

I swung the iron with all I had. It caught him above the ear and sank in an inch. I drew back again. The woman's eyes looked like clams on the half-shell. Her tongue lay flat against her palate and went *cuc-cuc-cuc*. I hit her behind the eye and the sounds ended.

They both looked dead-o, like tangled driftwood washed up on a sand bar. But I had to be sure. I swung the club again and again, like someone killing a snake. A red tornado swirled inside my head and I was pounding down the stairs before I realized it was over.

I stopped and slid my brain into gear. *Easy, lad.* Wipe the club handle clean; that's the way. Now put

it across the stairway so her husband will be sure to pick it up. There. Now his prints will be alone. Clever, clever . . .

The cops would love this case. They liked them simple. The papers would have hysterics: Husband Finds Wife in Salesman's Embrace; Bludgeons Both in Blind Fury. If the guy had any brains he'd plead temporary insanity. No jury would convict him.

I peered out the living room window. *Peace*. Two little girls were holding a tricycle race on the sidewalk.

I checked my watch. Four-forty. Time to get her husband home. How? Why not tell the truth? *This is a friend calling, Mister Blank. There's a man in bed with your wife*. Oh yes. That would bring him burning rubber.

I made a careful search of the living room, looking for his name and place of business. I had him pegged as a junior executive, judging from his medium-priced home and young wife. Probably worked too hard, considering the way the woman had gone for Mark.

The mail on the table didn't help: handout stuff addressed to boxholder. The telephone pad was a Rosetta Stone of cryptic letters and digits, but I had no key to her private code.

Four-fifty. I started sweating. I had to catch her husband before he left work. Otherwise he might stop

for a martini or two. Then the time of death wouldn't dovetail and the law would look for another suspect. Probably they'd smell out Mark's tumble with my wife. Once they had a motive, I'd be on a sleighride to Death Row.

Suppose she wasn't married? The thought formed icicles in my blood. I took the stairs in three jumps, damning myself for not checking.

They lay as I'd left them. Her left hand had clawed the sheet and bunched it in her fist. I kept my eyes from her face as I pried her fingers loose. I breathed again when I saw the wedding band on her third finger. Yes, she had a husband.

Her purse lay on the dresser. I grabbed it, jerked it open, and pulled out a plastic billfold. I shuffled through her cards and found the one I was looking for:

In case of death, notify M. E. Garrett, 22 Canyon Drive.

But it was no help. I already knew this address.

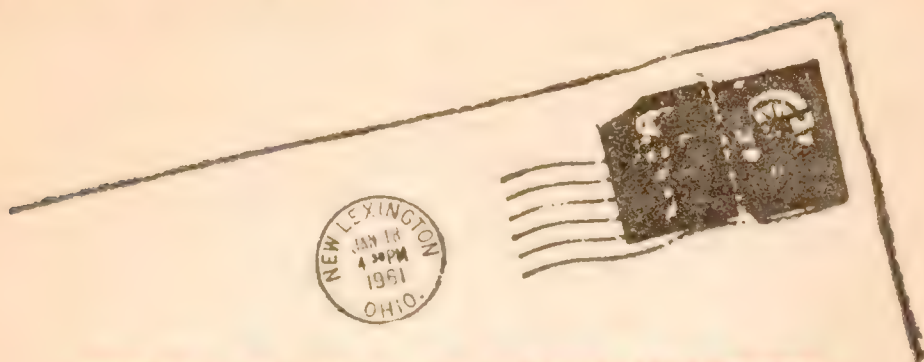
I started to sift the cards again, then I froze. *M. E. Garrett? Oh, no*. Mark had never said anything . . .

I raised my eyes from the billfold. On the dresser stood a photo in a silver frame. A collegiate type with a waxed brushcut grinned a fed-tiger grin at me. A chill horror spread out from my stomach as I read the inscription:

To my wife, the only woman I really love, Mark—



*The postman never came later than ten o'clock . . .
except that one day. And then he was deadly late.*



DEAD LETTER

Mr. Creighton Dummel
600-700 South Lyndon Drive
Belmar City, Ill.

BY DON TOTHE

Lou smiled behind the ascending cloud of gray cigar smoke. He shoved the cigar back into his mouth and allowed it to waggle, importantly, as he talked. "Twenty-five minutes, Smiley. If that mailman isn't here in twenty-five minutes." He patted the snub-nosed 38, meaningfully.

Smiley knew, without looking, that it was five minutes after eleven. The mailman never came later than ten o'clock. He took a deep

breath as he looked through the window. He muttered, "What a helluva day not to show up."

It was Melvin's third day at the Spencer Street Station and, at the rate things were going, it was certain to be his last.

He reached for another handful of letters, making only a slight dent in the towering stack. He studied each address, carefully, before shoving it into one of the compart-

ments in front of him. Sometimes, he scratched his chin; sometimes, it was his head. Every letter presented a challenge. He talked to himself when he found one that he couldn't read.

"Tacks," enjoying a brief lull at the "STAMPS" service window, smiled at the tall, gangling, eager Melvin. "What's wrong, kid? Take it easy."

Melvin looked at the clock and said, dismally, "It's a quarter past eleven. I'm already more than an hour late and I'm not through sorting, yet. Frank picked one helluva day not to show up."

"Believe me, kid. He'd rather be here than where he's at."

"Yeh, I know."

"Ever meet his father, kid?"

"Nope." Melvin's eyes clouded with shy embarrassment, and shame at begrudging Frank the day off.

"Great guy—Mister Dandoy—great guy. He—"

Melvin interrupted him by pointing to a little, old, gray-haired lady peering in through the semi-rusted bars.

She wanted "all the three-cent stamps I can get for one dollar."

An envelope slipped out of Melvin's hand and sailed to the floor. He reached down without bending his knees and picked it up, noticing the unusual name, "Creighton Dunnel."

"Sounds like a society character," he said to himself as he filed the

letter under 600-700 South Lyndon Drive.

"Smiley" Dunnel paced up and down in the living room of his apartment on Lyndon Drive. He puffed, nervously and vigorously, on the half-inch stub of a cigarette.

He avoided the sneering face of the man who sat on the faded, flowered davenport. Lou pushed back the French cuff of his right shirt-sleeve and tapped the face of his glittering watch. "Eleven twenty, Smiley. I've got a lunch engagement. I can't wait later than eleven-thirty."

"He'll be here. Any minute. He's never been this late."

Smiley's eyes, blinking with panic, darted from Lou's face to the window. He searched the street for the mailman.

"Two thousand bucks, Smiley. Sure your brother sent it? You been stallin' me for weeks."

"He sent it, I tell you! I talked to him on the phone. I know it'll be here today. Just a few more minutes, Lou."

Lou picked up the .38 and pointed the barrel in the direction of Smiley's stomach.

Smiley, involuntarily, put his right hand over his stomach as if to shelter it from the inevitable bullet. But it didn't come. He heard his stomach gurgle.

Lou heard it, too, and he laughed. "Sounds like you're getting hungry, Smiley." He stopped

laughing. "I am, too, and I don't like eating a late lunch."

The fortunes of the two men might be inferred from their sizes.

Lou was a large man—a large head set on a giant body. He was obviously a man who never missed a lunch or any other meal. His black, wavy hair was plastered in place with a cheap, smelly pomade. The pomade's aroma mingled with the strong scent of his after-shave lotion.

Smiley was a small man. His thin, unshaved face wore the haggard look of a condemned criminal. His eyes, pulled down by the puffy bags of a week of sleepless nights, twitched in rhythm with his rapid speech. There were deep laugh lines on his face, on each side of his mouth, that remained furrowed even though he wasn't smiling anymore.

"Are you sure he sent the dough?"

"Yes. Yes. He didn't want to but if he said he did then he did."

"Why the hell didn't he bring it?"

"He figgered this was the cheapest way of doing it. My cheap brother! He counts every penny. He sent a check—I'll probably have a helluva time cashing it."

Lou flicked the ashes of his cigar on the floor as he laid the gun on the table next to him. "You worry about getting it first. I'm giving that mailman eight more minutes—then I gotta follow orders."

"Orders?"

"To collect or else. The boss don't like welchers. We can't have guys stallin' us off. We don't run a loan office."

Smiley's hand reached for his back pocket. Lou's hand quickly went to his gun.

Smiley tried to smile. "I'm only gettin' my wallet. Listen, Lou, I can give you somethin' on account—just in case somethin' happened to that mailman."

He counted out ten tens.

Lou laughed but he picked up the money. "This is just a drop in the bucket. I gotta have all of it in—" he looked at his watch—"seven minutes. Where'd you get this? You musta pulled a job." Lou relit his cigar. "Oh, yeh—that little store over on Seventh Street. That was it, wasn't it?"

Smiley shook his head back and forth but not very convincingly.

"A hundred and fifty bucks, wasn't it, Smiley? Too bad you had to knock off the old man."

Smiley kept shaking his head, and blinking his eyes. His hand shook as he waved a finger at Lou. "I didn't pull that job, Lou. I had some dough socked away for a rainy day."

Lou laughed. He enjoyed the dismay on Smiley's face. He almost hoped the mailman wouldn't show. It'd be kicks bumping off Smiley, even though the boss would chew him out for letting Smiley get so far in the hole.

Melvin finished packing the mail cart and glanced at the clock. Eleven-twenty-five. He hurried out of the station. At least, he didn't have far to go—Frank's route was right next to the post office. As soon as Melvin got out of the station, he began delivering the letters.

He delivered the half-block on Spencer, the street the station was on, then he turned right to go up Seventh Street.

"Four minutes—that's all I can wait, Smiley. One thing I can't stand is to be late for a meal."

"Maybe we could go to the post office and see what happened to the mailman."

Lou shook his head. "I think he's already gone by—probably before I got here—you're just stallin' for more time—just like you been for the last two weeks." Lou picked up the gun and juggled it, nonchalantly, between his hands. He could see Smiley wanting to take a chance on jumping him while the gun was in the air. But Smiley knew that Lou didn't need the gun.

"I never figgered you for a stick-up man, Smiley. Guess you spotted that little old store, open late at night, with just the old man in there, and figgered it'd be easy pickins. Yeh, livin' right in the neighborhood here you could case the job pretty good, huh?"

Smiley no longer tried to deny it.

Lou went on. "You know, sooner or later, they'd catch up with you and give you the chair." Lou glanced at his watch, then aimed the gun, point-blank, at Smiley.

With the silencer, the sounds were no louder than a flamenco dancer's taps on a hardwood floor. There were three rapid taps.

Lou bent over Smiley's body, picked up an arm and allowed it to drop, deathfully, to the floor.

Melvin was at the end of the block. He stopped in front of the small grocery store at the corner. The door was locked. The sign read "CLOSED." He felt odd as he shoved the envelope into the slot in the door.

As he looked at the sign—"Dandoy's Grocery Store"—he thought of Frank—his father's funeral would be just about over. He wondered if Frank would ever be able to deliver mail on this route again. Even if Mrs. Dandoy sold the store, every time Frank delivered here he'd think of his father being shot down, by some two-bit punk, for a measly hundred and fifty bucks.

A letter slipped from his hand. As he reached to pick it up, his coat sleeve pulled back and he read his watch.

It was eleven-thirty-one.

The letter was the same one he'd dropped at the station.

"Well, Mister Dunnel, I hope it's nothing important."

MANHUNT

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